

REIMAGINING PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN A SCHOOL COMMUNITY BY CO-CREATING A PARTNERSHIP MODEL FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This inquiry engaged school leaders, teachers, and parents in a collaborative process to reimagine parental engagement in a rural-suburban middle school. The Community Learning Exchange (CLE) methodology was used to simultaneously collect data and to facilitate a shift from the traditional school-centric model toward co-created partnerships. The main finding details the school leaders' role in building a healthy school culture by cultivating conditions for meaningful, co-constructed engagement. Three interdependent factors emerged as essential to this partnership: (1) a deep understanding of barriers, (2) accessible, clear, and consistent communication, and (3) structured opportunities for collaborative discussion. Participants in the CLEs led to leadership changes in practice, shifting from directing outcomes to intentionally designing conditions that honor multiple perspectives, resulting in new, collaborative strategies for parental engagement.

REIMAGINING PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN A SCHOOL COMMUNITY BY
CO-CREATING A PARTNERSHIP MODEL FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL

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DEDICATION

Successfully defending this dissertation is a monumental achievement for a girl with my roots. My father was born to German immigrants who came to America with nothing but their names. Through hard work and practical wisdom, they built a livelihood in the mid-west and earned a good reputation. A divorced single mother from a farming family in rural eastern North Carolina raised my mother in Washington, D.C. Neither of my parents “came from much,” but both were raised to work hard, show up even when it was difficult, and take pride in doing the right thing. Their values laid the foundation for everything I have accomplished. Neither of my parents had the opportunity to go to college. However, they worked to ensure no barriers would prevent me from reaching any goal I set or dream I dared to dream.

I owe so much of who I am to my mother, Donna—a strong, outspoken woman who empowered me never to believe I was incapable of achieving something I set my mind to. She instilled in me a work ethic that has shaped my success, one I hope to see reflected in my own children as they grow. Her belief in me gave me confidence, perseverance, and the courage to pursue goals without limitation. Quitting has never been an option; nor has failure.

My sweet daddy did not get to see me complete this research or reach this milestone, but I know he was proud of my personal and professional accomplishments. I wish more than anything that he could be here on earth to celebrate, yet he remains with me always, guiding and grounding me through his love and example. He’d say, “put it on the doc’s tab” from now on.

My life would pale in comparison without my husband, Matt. He has never told me no; maybe my ideas are just that good (?). Instead, he has always helped me figure out how to bring even my wildest ideas to life. Earning my doctorate during the busiest season of our lives proved challenging in countless ways. Still, this accomplishment would not have been possible without

his encouragement, love, sacrifice, and unwavering support for both our children and me. Quite frankly, they all would have gone hungry if it weren't for him.

Everything I do and every decision I make is for my precious children, Gunnar, Kenly, and Tanner. When they look back on the time I sacrificed away from them, I hope they will understand it was done to create future opportunities for our family. I hope they always know there are no limits to their learning, their skills, or the experiences they can pursue. May my work inspire them to be lifelong learners, always picking up a book when they want to learn something new. For my daughter, especially, I hope seeing me accomplish this reminds you that there is no glass ceiling you cannot shatter. To my sons, I hope you remember the ways your dad carried our family while I chased this goal, and that you, too, will not only chase your dreams but will support your future wives' dreams the way he has mine.

When The Beatles said "I get by with a little help from my friends", they must have had friends like Susie, Kimber, Megan, Jennifer, Lauren, and Jessica. Or a team like Jessica, Megan, Sarah, Cameron, Rebecca, Nina, Brock Amber, and Donnielle. These people were participants, inquiry partners, encouragers and believers. My "fairy Godmother" Bernadette has shown me so much love and encouragement in this journey. She was quick to pray over me, pray for me and cheer me on. This learning I gained will make me a better leader and friend to these dear ones and hopefully will inspire them to continue learning, growing, and shattering ceilings placed upon them.

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Finally, I would not have any research to present in this dissertation were it not for the teachers, staff, and parents who generously gave of their time. I learned so much from you, through your dialogue, your notes, and your meaningful interactions with one another. I hope you took away new learning and will approach new situations with a dual-perspective when collaborating in the future.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Each fall, millions of students transition from elementary school to middle school, marking one of the most significant shifts in their educational journey. The transition is often a time of apprehension and anxiety, as many young adolescents are facing significant cognitive, social-emotional, and physical changes (Bailey et al., 2015). However, in a study by Bhargava and Witherspoon (2015), both students and parents reported a decline in parental involvement at school during students' transitions. Furthermore, students reported decreased parental involvement at home, and parents reported decreased communication and volunteering at school (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015). The National Education Association (Wolpert-Gawron, 2019) noted that parent involvement declines as students progress from one grade to the next, but the most pronounced decline occurs when students enter middle school. It could be that the student expressed, or the parent perceived, a desire for more autonomy as students enter middle school (Smith et al., 2019). However, when parents are engaged and involved in their students' transitions, students adjust more effectively, and their grades remain consistent (Henderson & Berla, 1996). Students whose parents are involved in middle school achieve higher than their peers, positively impacting their future educational goals (Epstein et al., 2019). This inquiry examines parent involvement in a middle school community, the effects of a co-created partnership model between teachers and parents to increase parent involvement, and the impacts on school leadership when parent involvement is a focus.

Background of the Inquiry

Parent involvement in schools has evolved tremendously since the 19th century. At this time, parents, communities, and churches controlled schools, particularly their structures, curricula, and the hiring and termination of faculty (Epstein, 1987). When parents, the

community, and the church agreed on how to manage schools, parent involvement was at an all-time high (Prentice & Houston, 1975). This began to change in the mid-century, when schools shifted their focus to teaching and learning, and parents were urged to take a more supportive role in their students' education. Additionally, as educator programs were developed and refined, and teaching was recognized as a profession, parents' involvement with schools further declined. Teachers and schools began to take the position that parents were not qualified to offer guidance or opinions on how schools were managed or on which curriculum was used (Katz, 1995). In the 21st century, parent involvement is mainly limited to parents who can volunteer, donate, or attend school events. However, for schools and students to achieve success and demonstrate sustained improvement, parents and teachers must work together to build relationships grounded in communication, participation, and trust. (Berger, 2007). This inquiry aims to explore strategies for schools to re-engage parents through collaboration, particularly during the middle school years. Fostering collaboration between schools and parents will enhance students' academic success and strengthen the overall school community.

Context of Inquiry

This inquiry takes place in Pitt County, an urban-rural mixed community in eastern North Carolina. According to the United States Census Bureau's 2020 Decennial Census, Pitt County has a population of 170,243, with half of those residents living in the County's largest city, Greenville (Pitt County Government, 2024). Greenville is also the geographic context of this inquiry, centered on the school community of Happy Middle School. Happy is a traditional, 6th through 8th grade middle school within the greater Pitt County Schools district. Happy is the largest middle school and the 6th-largest school overall within the school district, with a population of nearly 950 students. The demographic breakdown is estimated at 51% white and

49% minority students. (see Figure 1). Nearly 30% of the student population is economically disadvantaged, and approximately 10% receive special education services. A principal and two assistant principals lead the school. There are 60 licensed teachers and approximately 20 support staff, including custodians, teacher assistants, and clerical staff (Pitt County Schools, 2024). Happy Middle School is a high-achieving school compared with similarly sized schools within the district and state, annually meeting its proficiency goals and exceeding growth targets. North Carolina's educator effectiveness model focuses more on student growth than on proficiency. The Department of Public Instruction defines growth as the "academic progress that students make over the course of a grade or class" (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2024). Student proficiency, on the other hand, is defined as demonstrating mastery of content standards, as evidenced by a score indicating that they are well prepared for the next grade level or course (2024). In the 8 years for which growth has been measured, Happy Middle School has exceeded growth in 8 of those years (North Carolina School Report Card, 2024).

Statement of the Problem of Practice

This inquiry addresses the decline in parent engagement, particularly as students transition from elementary to middle school, by reimagining it through the co-creation of a partnership model. It is understood that parental involvement is an essential component of a student's academic success (Benner et al., 2016). However, research also shows a noticeable decline in involvement during the middle school years (Hill & Taylor, 2004). This inquiry aims to identify ways schools and parents can stay involved for the betterment of a student's academic achievement and for the improvement of the school community. This inquiry stands out because it emphasizes helping parents and schools co-create meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships to support students. Unlike other studies that primarily focus on increasing parent

Racial Demographics of Happy Middle School Students

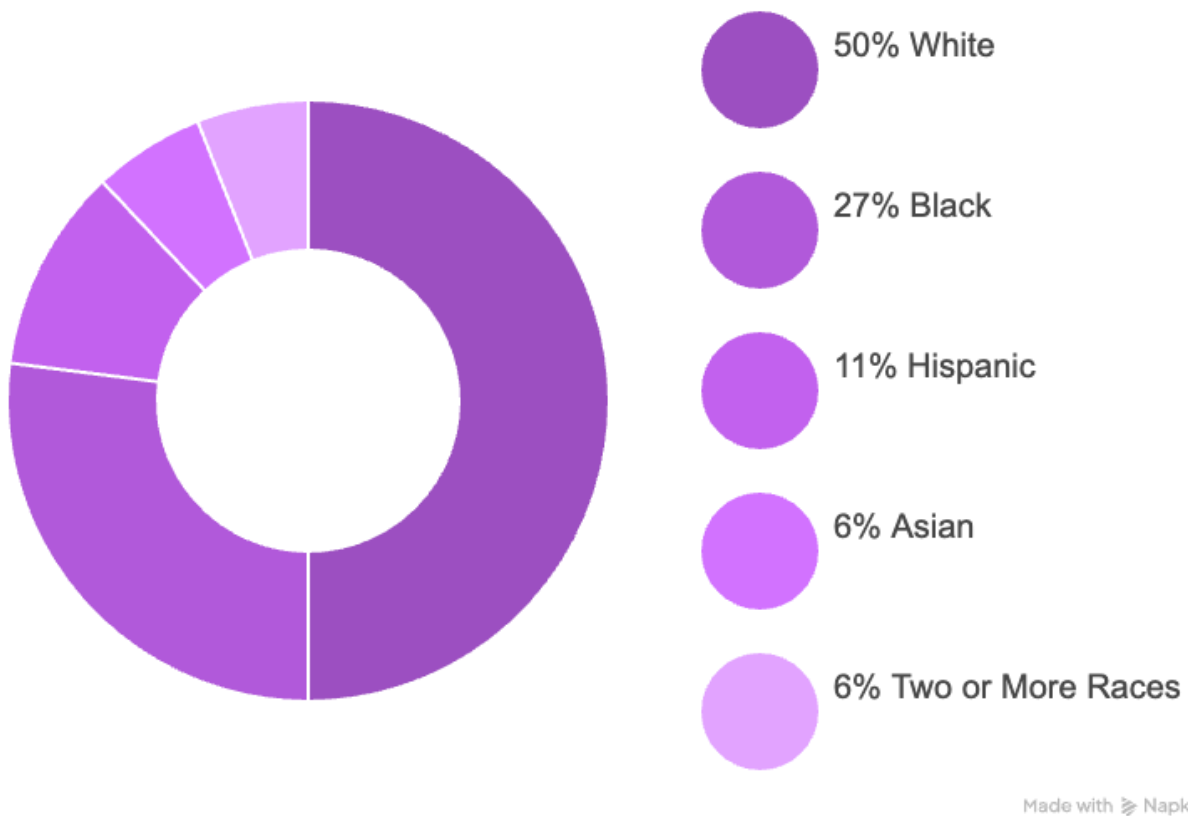


Figure 1. Racial demographics for Happy Middle School in 2024

involvement through parent-led efforts or school-based functions, this approach seeks to foster collaboration between the two entities. As a middle school principal, I recognize the critical importance of this work. The challenges associated with the transition to middle school and the typical decline in parental involvement underscore the need for a comprehensive, co-created parent engagement program. As a parent, I also recognize the importance of this work, as I have found myself disengaged from my children's schools at both the elementary and secondary levels. The current programming of parent engagement opportunities offered at my children's schools feels forced, unwelcome, and overall, stressful.

The focus of this inquiry is particularly relevant to all middle school principals and staff as they welcome new 6th graders and work with parents during this transitional period to sustain their engagement. This inquiry addresses the decline in parent engagement, particularly as students transition from elementary to middle school, by reimagining it through the co-creation of a partnership model. Therefore, emphasizing the need for joint efforts and collaboration between schools and parents to maintain strong and effective relationships.

Inquiry Guiding Questions

The questions guiding this inquiry are:

1. What do parents need and want in terms of parent engagement in order to increase parent involvement in middle school?
2. How do parents and school staff collaborate to create and implement a parent engagement plan?
3. How has co-creating a model for parent involvement impacted me as a school leader?

Overview of Inquiry

To address these guiding questions, the scholarly practitioner employed a convergent

mixed-methods design grounded in improvement science. This inquiry uses qualitative research data obtained through Participatory Action Research (PAR) design. As the scholarly practitioner, I began by hosting a Community Learning Exchange (CLE) with teachers. During this CLE, I introduced the inquiry, and participants were invited to engage with colleagues interested in increasing parent engagement. I then facilitated a CLE exclusive to Happy Middle School parents. Later, a third CLE, comprised of a mixed group of teachers and parents, reconvened to review and reflect on the collected data and to develop suggestions for school leaders collaboratively. Finally, I facilitated a concluding Community Learning Exchange to reflect on and capture the insights gained by the teacher throughout this process and reflect on the experience of co-creation with parents.

Inquiry Partners

The inquiry partners were the school counselors and the instructional coach at the school where the inquiry takes place. Each school counselor holds a master's degree in School Counseling and has worked at the Happy Middle School for more than 5 years. Prior to the start of this inquiry, both participated in a book study of Middle School Matters (Fagell, 2019) with the scholarly practitioner. The instructional coach has 29 years of experience, all of which has been in middle school, and 17 years of those years have been at Happy Middle School. She also holds a master's degree and is invested not only as a staff member but also as the parent of two former Happy Middle School students. Her instructional experience will be used to plan and execute the CLEs.

Theoretical Framework: Epstein's Model of Parent Involvement

Epstein's (1985, 1987, 1995, 2002) theoretical framework of the six major types of parent involvement is as follows: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision

making, and community collaboration. Epstein's (2009) later research model would include two main components: spheres and the six types of parent involvement. These six types of parent involvement are the blueprint for the comprehensive parent engagement program developed by the scholarly practitioner. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the six types of parent involvement between home and community settings. Epstein's model is divided into two spheres: Parenting in the Community and Parenting at Home. Each sphere has three subset ideas. Parenting at Home comprises Learning at Home, Parenting, and Communicating. Parenting in the Community comprises Volunteering, Decision-Making, and Collaboration. At the core of the two spheres is Student Academic Performance.

Parenting refers to the supportive environment created at home that fosters learning. Parents may be provided with resources and educational opportunities to learn how to create these conditions. For this type of parent involvement, success could be measured by improved student attendance, respectful relationships between students and parents, and a greater sense of the importance of school (Epstein et al., 2002; Tekin, 2011).

Communicating refers to the communication between the school and parents regarding a student's performance and school programming or events. Through this component, parents are encouraged to participate in parent-teacher conferences, understand school policies and procedures, and be engaged and aware of student performance (Epstein et al., 2002; Tekin, 2011). The impact of this type of parent involvement is reflected in the skills learned by students in communicating with adults, and increased learning through their own volunteering activities (Epstein et al., 2002; Tekin, 2011).

Learning at home refers to learning that takes place in the home. Parents must have access to resources that support their students at home, including internet access and devices,

Theoretical Framework Epstein's School-Family-Community Partnership Model

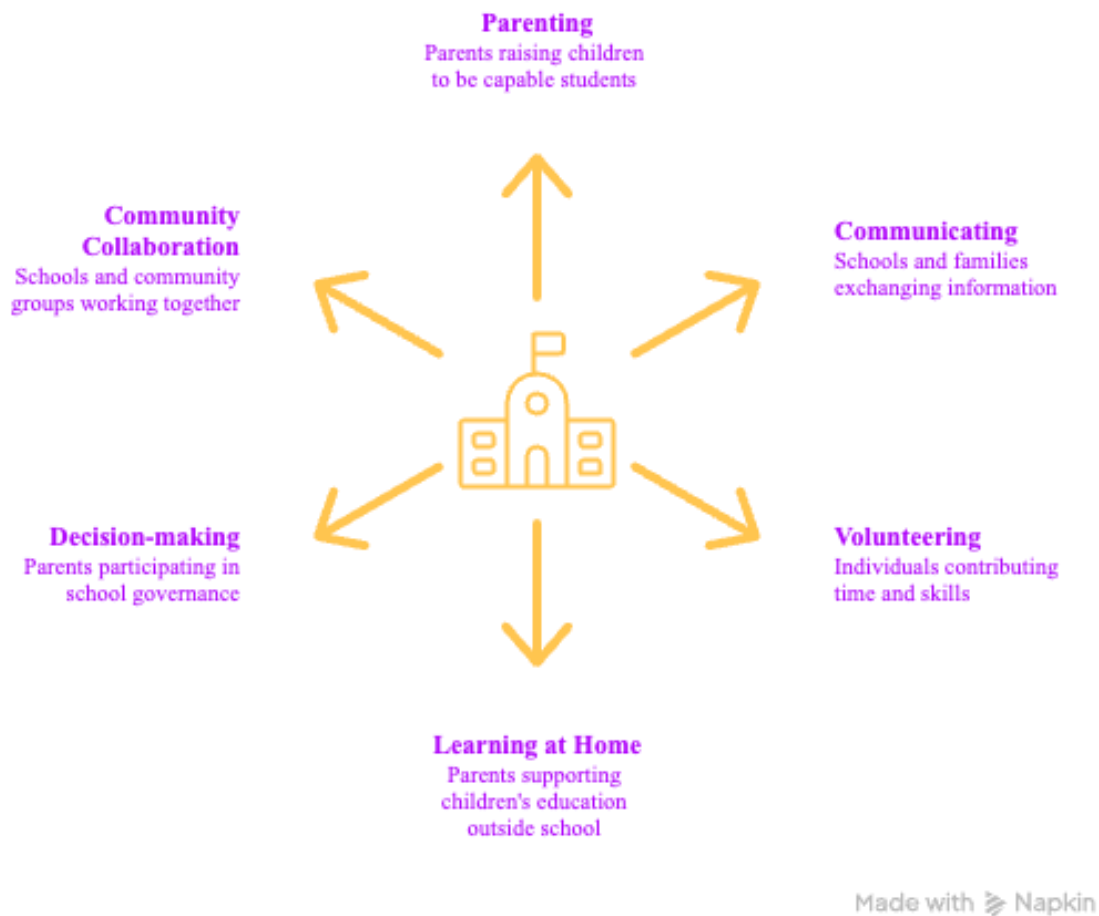


Figure 2. Epstein's Model of Parent Involvement (Epstein et al., 2002; Tekin, 2011).

including internet access and devices, an understanding of expectations for homework and assignments, and other information that enables parents to assist their students at home. For this type of parent involvement, homework completion rates should increase, and when homework is assigned appropriately, it should extend the learning experience in class, resulting in higher achievement. Learning at home will also enable students to view their parents as partners or advocates in their educational journey (Epstein et al., 2002; Tekin, 2011).

In the Parenting in the Community sphere, decision-making refers to schools that allow parents to participate in the decision-making process through committees. Parents can serve on committees as leaders or representatives in areas of interest or expertise. Popular ways for parents to be involved include a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO), or the School Improvement Team (SIT). The impact on student learning is a greater understanding of the students being served within a particular school community, achieved through the representation of diverse voices and perspectives (Epstein et al., 2002; Tekin, 2011).

Collaboration refers to the recognition that a school is part of the broader community. When parents are involved in the school and community, they can become aware of programs and resources that may assist their family and of those that could benefit the school (Epstein et al., 2002; Tekin, 2011).

Several key terms are used throughout the inquiry and are defined as follows:

Community Learning Exchange. A collaborative gathering of diverse stakeholders where ideas are exchanged, and participants learn from each other in order to implement action steps that improve schools and communities (Bromer & Crawford, 2002).

Home-based parental involvement. Communication between parents and students about school,

engagement in school assignments, and fostering a learning environment at home (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Middle school. The educational phase is between elementary school and high school. In the United States, middle school is commonly considered the phase of grades 6th through eighth. (George, 1990).

Parent Engagement. An intentional partnership between school and home for the betterment of students (Ferlazzo, 2011).

Parent involvement. The parents' involvement refers to the commitment of time and resources to their student's education (Murray et al., 2014).

Parent over-involvement. Parental over-involvement refers to a strict parenting style where parents become overly involved in their student's education, not allowing them autonomy to make decisions and learn from their decisions (Fernandez-Alonso et al., 2017).

Perception. A personal vantage point or self-analysis of an event or situation. Perception is understood as the integration of the environment and the interpretation of experience. It is noted that some individuals (students) may perceive experiences or situations differently (Witt, 2011).

School-based parent involvement. Parental active participation in any school setting, such as parent-teacher meetings and extracurricular events, provides opportunities for interaction with teachers, school staff, and other parents and students (Myers & Myers, 2015).

Transition to middle school. Transition to middle school refers to the process of changing from an elementary school to a middle school environment (Gilewski & Nunn, 2016).

Assumptions

For this inquiry, it is assumed that the teachers and parents participating provide honest responses and engage fully in dialogue during the Community Learning Exchanges. It can be

assumed that some parents may not understand how to be involved in their student's schooling, and they choose to participate in the exchange, seeking to understand. Others may participate in the inquiry, believing they are already involved and have suggestions for how the school can improve. Similarly, it can be assumed that teacher choosing to participate already engage with parents. Another assumption is that both, teacher and parents in this study seek a deeper connection with their school community. Lastly, it is assumed that staff and teachers are interested in collaborating with parents to co-create a plan to increase parent engagement.

Scope and Delimitations

The inquiry engages up to 20 parents and teachers who commit to participating in up to 2-3 learning exchanges. The scholarly practitioner's goal is for the group's demographics to reflect those of the school's student body, including socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, special education status, and gender.

Limitations

Teachers and parents who are part of the initial Community Learning Exchange may move unexpectedly or experience significant life changes that affect their ability to participate in the follow up learning exchanges to which they are invited. Additionally, teachers and parents may have external factors that affect their engagement with school, such as work and home responsibilities. Alternatively, they may observe adequate student success, which may lead them to believe their engagement with school is sufficient. Societal norms of declining engagement at the secondary level may skew a parent's perspective.

Significance of Inquiry

This inquiry is significant in understanding the relationships between parental engagement and parent involvement. Research has shown that a successful middle school transition relates to a

successful high school experience (Balfanz, 2009) and to an overall positive trajectory toward success beyond high school. This inquiry helps parents and educators understand their respective roles in parental involvement and become active members of the school community. Most importantly, this inquiry engages parents in the discussion to further understand their perspectives regarding parent involvement. In doing so, a co-created partnership model articulates what each entity needs from the other to increase parental involvement and improve student achievement. This inquiry is necessary to identify strategies for schools to recoup parent involvement, particularly during the middle school years, so that schools and parents can remain connected to improve students' academic achievement and the overall school.

Advances in Practice

This body of research supports other middle school leaders and parents wishing to increase parent involvement through a co-created partnership model. Leaders will be able to use the model created and tailor it to their school community's unique needs. Because Bhargava and Witherspoon (2015) found that both students and parents acknowledged a decline in parental involvement at school as students transitioned to middle school, it is important to be intentional about engaging parents in co-creating and sustaining a culture of involvement.

Summary

As millions of students transition from elementary school to middle school each year, it is important to keep parents engaged as part of that transition and encourage them to stay involved in their student's educational journey through the secondary level. Students and parents both report declines in parent involvement at school and at home (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015). Students whose parents are involved in their middle school experience achieve higher than their peers, positively impacting their future educational goals (Epstein et al., 2019). This inquiry aims

to explore strategies for schools to re-engage parents through collaboration, thereby fostering co-creation between schools and parents to enhance students' academic success and strengthen the overall school community.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Many schools face challenges in creating meaningful opportunities for parents to engage in their child's educational experience (Cavanaugh, 2012). Research shows that strong parent-school partnerships are critical for student success (Decker et al., 2000) and are essential for positive educational outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). When parents are actively involved throughout middle and high school, students tend to perform better academically (Deslandes et al., 1997), exhibit higher future aspirations (Trusty, 1996), and experience fewer disciplinary issues (Deslandes et al., 1997). Unfortunately, parental involvement often declines from elementary to middle school, where it can become minimal or even non-existent (Wright & Willis, 2003). Schools must intentionally create opportunities for ongoing parental engagement, especially during the critical middle school years. In 2008, the National Education Association identified the lack of parent involvement as the most significant issue facing schools. Despite efforts, a 2016 National Household Education Surveys Program report showed that parental involvement remains a persistent challenge.

This review of the literature introduces the theoretical framework, compares parent engagement and parent involvement, traces the history of parental involvement in education, defines the roles parents play in supporting learning, and highlights the barriers families may face in participating in school activities. Additionally, it explores how schools can facilitate parental involvement to reduce the decline as students enter middle school.

Theoretical Framework: Epstein's Model for Parent Involvement

Epstein (2002) has identified six types of parent involvement: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision making, and (6) collaborating with the community, creating the Model for Parent Involvement. The six types of

parent involvement are detailed below.

Parenting refers to the supportive environment that families create at home for their students. For this type of parent involvement, schools may offer parenting workshops, support groups, or suggestions for improving learning at home. Workshops could be geared toward attendance, adolescent development, student behavior, or the importance of school. (Epstein et al., 2002).

Communication refers to the effective exchange of information between school and home. Communication may concern student performance, school programs, or other opportunities for parent involvement. Newsletters, mass mailings or calls, social media, or school websites are means of communication between schools and parents (NCES, 2005). Through this type of parent involvement, schools should also inform parents about school rules, opportunities for parent-teacher conferences, and updates to ensure parents are knowledgeable. When necessary, translation services should be provided to parents (Epstein et al., 2002).

Schools should make every effort to welcome parent volunteers. Volunteer programs and opportunities can benefit students, teachers, and the school community. Opportunities that would otherwise not be available to students are made possible by volunteers. This type of parent involvement promotes students' development in communicating with adults and improves skills through the activities offered (Epstein et al., 2002).

Learning at home refers to the support parents provide to their students. It also means ensuring that students have access to information and resources at home to support their success. Schools can support this type of parent involvement by providing information and resources that enable parents to assist with homework. Students who view their parents as partners in homework or reading have higher self-efficacy and higher homework completion rates (Epstein

et al., 2002).

This type of parent involvement refers to parents being part of the decision-making process at their student's school. This could be as part of a School Improvement Team (SIT), through a parent organization such as a Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) or Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). When parents serve in such roles, they can better understand the school's needs. From the perspective of the school, parents being part of the decision-making allows for representatives to give an account of the parent population and helps establish a healthy school-family relationship (Epstein et al., 2002).

Collaboration refers to the school and the parent community working together to improve school initiatives, programs, and opportunities by leveraging community services and resources. This type of parent involvement allows parents to connect with outside resources that promote learning for both students and parents. Students benefit from the skills, resources, and talents shared by participating community members (Epstein et al., 2002).

Parent Engagement vs. Parent Involvement

For many years, researchers have attempted to distinguish between parent engagement and parent involvement (Ferlazzo, 2013). Ferlazzo (2011) compared the dictionary definitions of "involve" and "engage": "involve" means "to enfold or envelope," while "engage" means "to come together and interlock." He argued that parent involvement is more about "doing to," while parent engagement implies a collaborative "doing with" (Ferlazzo, 2011). Other scholars, like Goodall and Montgomery (2014), describe parent involvement and engagement as a continuum of partnership between parents and schools. Parent involvement often reflects a parent's commitment of time and resources to the child's academic life (Murray et al., 2014). Hill and Tyson (2009) emphasized that a parent's attitude toward education and communication about

academic expectations are also key components of involvement.

Research indicates that teachers often define parent involvement based on the frequency of parent-school contact, while parents may perceive involvement differently (Herman & Reinke, 2017; Smith, 2015). Many factors influence parental involvement, including family characteristics (e.g., educational level, family structure, and work commitments) and child characteristics (e.g., gender, grade level, and academic performance) (Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001). These factors shift over time, which can affect the level of parent involvement.

In an attempt to define parental engagement, one team of researchers suggested visualizing a child's school and the parent orbiting it (Cyr et al., 2022). However, they also noted that another way to understand parental engagement is for the school to orbit around the student and family. Both conceptualizations indicate that parent engagement can be interpreted and defined by the extent of engagement of the parents in their student's education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Prince-Mitchell, 2009). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines parent engagement as parents and schools working together to support students' development, health, and improved learning. Furthermore, the CDC states that children who are supported in school by their parents and families are less likely to smoke or struggle with mental health, exhibit less violent behaviors, and are more physically active (CDC, 2012).

History of Parental Involvement

Historically, a student's education began at home, as seen by parents and the society within the parents' realm of responsibility. This form of education encompassed discipline, basic skills, work skills, ethics, and personal or familial values. This education was done privately, in the home rather than through a public institution (Berger, 1981). Parents typically arranged secondary education through apprenticeships, during which work skills were acquired (Hiatt-

Michael, 1994).

Parent involvement in U.S. schools dates back to the 19th century when the colonies were granted control over education (Pulliam, 1987). At this time, communities, churches, and parents played an active role in school governance, curriculum design, and staffing (Epstein, 1987). This level of involvement peaked when these groups cooperated to manage schools. Because many of the citizens in these colonies were immigrants who had left Europe seeking religious freedom, these early schools often reflected the community's religious beliefs (Hiatt-Michael, 1994).

However, in the mid-20th century, as schools shifted toward formalized instruction and the professionalization of educators, parents' roles became more passive, with schools viewing themselves as the primary authority in education (Katz, 1995). The bureaucratization of schools would create more equitable operations for students. Systems were in place to hire teachers and school officials based on professional qualifications rather than favoritism (Hiatt-Michael, 1994). However, as bureaucracy grew, so did the separation of parents from schools and from daily decision-making. Davies (1992) commented that "professionalism of administrators and teachers led to keeping parents out of power influence."

The National Congress of Mothers (NCM) was founded in 1897 by a group of middle- and upper-class mothers who met with teachers on Saturdays. They would study curricula, become informed about child development theories, and encourage others to become involved in their children's schooling. Through petitions to the principal, they would express their concerns and seek opportunities to participate. The influence of this group would become the basis for the modern Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), which is active on nearly every school campus today (Hiatt-Michael, 1994). As America continued to grow with immigrants, the PTA was known for helping to "Americanize newcomers to the country and to teach middle-class parenting" (Davies,

1992). In the 1940's, monthly PTA meetings were considered essential community events (Hiatt-Michael, 1994). To further encourage parental involvement, and in conjunction with a court ruling, federally funded programs were implemented. Project Head Start in 1964 for disadvantaged inner-city students; the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which required parents to serve on advisory boards; and the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1974, which required a partnership with parents (Hiatt-Michael, 1994).

In the mid-1980s, the emphasis shifted again to student success (Markow & Cooper, 2008), prompting a resurgence in the importance of parental involvement. The 1994 Goals 2000: Educate America Act and subsequent legislation, including the No Child Left Behind Act and the Every Student Succeeds Act, recognized parent involvement as key to improving academic outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, 2015). Despite this, in the 21st century, parent involvement is often limited to volunteering, donating, or attending school events. For sustained student success, however, ongoing collaboration between parents and schools—based on trust, communication, and mutual participation—is essential (Berger, 2003).

Building parental involvement continues to be an essential component of the teacher's professional responsibilities (Landgon & Vester, 2000). When surveyed, elementary and middle school teachers were asked, "What is one thing they would change to improve public schools?" All listed parental involvement as a top priority (Langdon & Vester, 2000). However, although building relationships and fostering open lines of communication are important, many teachers feel unprepared for this responsibility (Morris & Taylor, 1998). In a study published by Hughes and Kwok (2007), the authors asserted that, to make a positive difference in student achievement, productive parent-teacher relationships were vital. Henderson and Mapp (2002) maintain that when parents and schools work together to support student learning, students

achieve more, they stay in school longer, and generally like school more.

When examining the role of administrators and parents in parental involvement, it was found that administrators tend to value parental involvement primarily for its potential to raise student achievement (Auerbach, 2007). This is not surprising in a culture of school accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (McNamara Horvat et al., 2010). While parents are generally considered a student's first teacher, once students enter traditional school, administrators view the academic realm to be solely under their purview. However, when students fail, parents are often held accountable, leading to tense relations (McNamara Horvat, et al., 2010). The struggle for control and authority in schools has been well documented, illustrating the shift from parents to educators (Cutler, 2000). Parents and school officials have been called "natural enemies" in a previous publication, which underscores the power struggles that remain at the core of this relationship (Waller, 1932).

Parents' Role In Education

A 2018 study by Oswald et al. examined parental involvement in education, utilizing data from the 2012 National Household Education Survey. This study found that parental involvement varied with child gender, race, grade level, and family structure. For example, girls had higher rates of parental involvement, and white students had more parental involvement compared to Hispanic students (Oswald et al., 2018). Schools with smaller student populations saw higher levels of parent engagement, and parents who were satisfied with their children's schools were more likely to be involved (Oswald et al., 2018).

A parent's role in their child's education is understood to begin at home, where a supportive learning environment is created (Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017). Research has shown that school and family are two of the most influential factors in early adolescent development

(Perkins et al., 2016), a concept further supported by Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence model (Figure 3) (2018). According to this model, the most significant overlap of family, school, and community influences occurs during the early school years, especially preschool and elementary school, which underscores the critical role of early parental involvement in shaping educational outcomes.

Schools can influence the extent of overlap between family, school, and community spheres. Limited communication and few interactions with families keep these spheres distanced, whereas schools that foster rich communication and high-quality interactions help bring the spheres closer together (Epstein et al., 2002). This model underscores the shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities in promoting student success (Epstein, 2018). Epstein's research highlights the family as one of the most important contexts for a child's learning and development. One key challenge faced by many middle school parents is how to engage meaningfully as students transition to middle school, balancing the students' growing autonomy with the parents' responsibility to support their learning (Smith et al., 2019). However, effective school-family partnerships can enhance the school climate and provide parents with skills and resources that foster greater involvement (Epstein, 2011).

Today, parents are expected to support their students' education while entrusting teachers with responsibility for daily instruction and academic activities. (Cooper, 2009). However, at present, there is often a tension that exists between school officials who believe they alone are qualified to make the complex educational decisions for students and the parents who believe they should have a voice in their student's education (Hiatt-Michael, 1994).

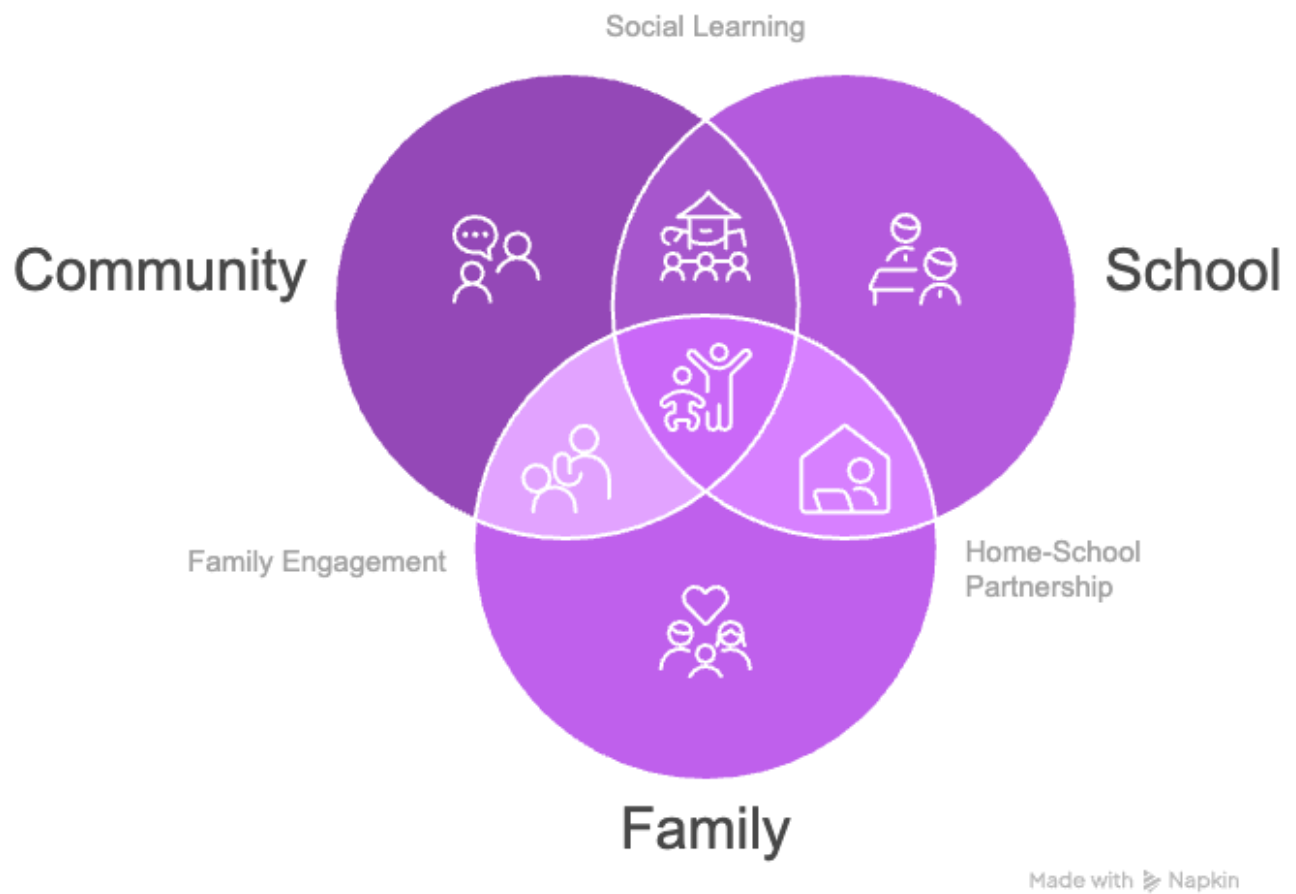


Figure 3: Overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2018)

Parent Engagement Barriers

Wright and Willis (2003) identify several barriers to parental engagement. A primary challenge is the increasing independence that young adolescents seek, which often leads parents to believe that their children need more autonomy. The transition from elementary to middle school also increases the number of teachers a parent interacts with, from one to as many as six. This shift, coupled with the larger class sizes and increased caseloads for teachers, results in more generalized communication rather than the personalized interactions that were common in elementary school. Another significant barrier is cultural differences, particularly language barriers, which can make it difficult for parents to engage with the school. Additionally, stricter security measures in schools have reduced opportunities for parents to volunteer, attend assemblies, or participate in large gatherings.

It is understood that socioeconomic status is determined by occupation status and income, which is generally derived from educational attainment (Barbee, 2010). Those living in poverty or in a low socioeconomic status face unique obstacle to the traditional parental involvement opportunities. Parents and students living in poverty tend to be less educated than their more affluent counterparts and often do not have the same educational expectations for their students. They are less likely to convey to their students the connection between education and future opportunities (Benner et al., 2016).

For African American parents, especially those from low-income backgrounds, barriers to involvement are even more pronounced (Koonce & Harper, 2005). These barriers include economic hardship, work demands, and raising younger children, all of which limit their ability to engage with schools compared to more affluent or White parents (Frew et al., 2012). Race and socioeconomic status are key factors that shape parental involvement and can lead to different

school experiences for parents of color. This aligns with Critical Race Theory (CRT), which argues that racism is embedded in American society and affects school policies and practices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Brannon (2007) further explored reasons for declining parental involvement, noting that some parents feel their children do not want them involved, have negative experiences with schools, struggle to keep up with an accelerated curriculum, or have limited time due to other commitments. Low-income parents often face unique challenges, such as lower educational attainment and limited understanding of how education relates to future opportunities (Benner et al., 2016). These parents may also feel stigmatized when their involvement does not meet the school's expectations (Lechuga-Pena & Brisson, 2018).

A 2018 study by Lechuga-Pena and Brisson, which surveyed four mothers living in a housing project, revealed key barriers to involvement, including cultural and language differences, undertones of racism, and the challenges of being a sole caregiver or single parent. Malone (2013) identified additional barriers for low-income families, including limited education, work schedules, transportation challenges, and a preference for home-based involvement. Malone suggests that schools can support greater involvement by offering flexible volunteer opportunities, childcare, and parent training programs.

In a 2013 study, Williams and Sanchez identified three main barriers to parental involvement among low-income families of color: lack of time, access, and awareness. Time poverty, defined as the demands of home and work responsibilities, often conflicts with scheduled school events (Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Lack of access refers to physical barriers, such as an inaccessible school building or transportation challenges. Additionally, many parents report a lack of awareness of school events or policies, mainly when students serve as

messengers, which can be ineffective (Williams & Sanchez, 2013). School staff often struggle to maintain up-to-date contact information, further hindering communication with parents.

Posey-Moddoh and Haley-Lock (2020) also explored the impact of employment status on parent involvement, noting that although many studies link parents' employment to reduced involvement, few have examined how employment affects engagement. Their research underscores the importance of schools working with families to create tailored opportunities for involvement that account for parents' unique life context.

Ways Schools and Parents Can Improve Parent Involvement

Schools must take a proactive role in creating opportunities for parent involvement. One effective strategy is for schools to communicate expectations for parental engagement clearly. Regular updates on what students are learning and suggestions for how parents can support their children's learning at home can significantly increase parental involvement (Redding, 2004). According to the Harvard Family Research Project, strategies such as school-home compacts, structured communication about homework, and family-school links are essential for maintaining parental engagement. They recommend that schools offer opportunities for parents to interact with school personnel through home visits, conferences, family nights, and open houses. These events enable parents to receive direct guidance on supporting their child's education, fostering a continuous dialogue between home and school that strengthens both the school community and student performance (Redding et al., 2004).

Parents can further support student learning by setting high expectations and promoting both socially appropriate school behaviors and cognitive skills, such as reading and problem-solving (Kaplan Toren, 2013). Additionally, parents can participate in school activities by volunteering, joining school committees, or supporting extracurricular programs (Toren, 2013).

In response to parental feedback, schools can provide flexible opportunities for involvement, offer incentives, and adopt an open-door policy that encourages collaboration between parents and school staff to benefit the entire school community (Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Hill, Witherspoon, and Bartz (2018) emphasize that effective parental involvement during middle school years should strike a balance between support and autonomy. While parents may reduce direct behavioral control to foster students' decision-making skills and sense of responsibility, it is crucial to maintain an appropriate level of involvement. This balance is critical as parental engagement naturally tends to decrease during adolescence, reflecting the need for students to develop independence (Hill et al., 2018).

Summary

Research consistently shows that parent involvement is a key factor in student success. Therefore, schools need to develop intentional, creative strategies to engage parents, particularly during the middle school years. Schools must collaborate with community partners to remove barriers to involvement, such as language differences and time constraints. Parents must recognize the importance of their role in supporting their child's education, while schools must be responsive to the barriers parents face and create culturally relevant opportunities for involvement (Thomas-Lester, 2018; Lechuga-Pena & Brisson, 2018).

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

This inquiry sought to address the decline in parent involvement in middle school by co-creating a partnership model for parent engagement. Parent involvement is known to decline as students transition from elementary to middle school. It is understood that parental involvement is an essential component of a student's academic success (Benner et al., 2016). However, research also shows a noticeable decline in engagement during the middle school years (Hill & Taylor, 2004), when students still need guidance and parental involvement. This inquiry aimed to identify ways schools and parents can stay connected for the betterment of a student's academic achievement and for the improvement of the overall school community.

This chapter describes the inquiry's guiding questions and context, including the inquiry partners, design, and rationale. Participants, recruitment, and demographics are detailed. Furthermore, the inquiry procedures, data analysis, and inquiry design rigor are explained. The chapter concludes with delimitations, limitations, assumptions, and the role of the scholarly practitioner.

Inquiry Guiding Questions

The questions that guided this inquiry are:

1. What do parents need and want in terms of parent engagement in order to increase parent involvement in middle school?
2. How do parents and school staff collaborate to create and implement a parent engagement plan?
3. How has co-creating a model for parent involvement impacted me as a school leader?

When designing the inquiry questions to guide the study, it was important to understand parents' needs and wants, where teachers' and parents' understanding of parent involvement

begins, and how teachers and parents can co-create a parent involvement model that impacts parent engagement. Informal discussions with parents and teachers indicate that most equate involvement with the number of contacts made or the time spent attending events or volunteering. Parent involvement in the 21st century has primarily centered on how schools plan parental engagement opportunities. The first inquiry question shifted the narrative and asked parents what they needed to be engaged. The second inquiry question aims to answer how staff and parents can collaborate to implement a parent involvement plan. The third inquiry question is an important focus for the scholarly practitioner to reflect on how the co-creation experience has shaped their future leadership and relationship-building.

Context of the Inquiry

This inquiry took place in Pitt County, an urban-rural mixed community in Eastern North Carolina. Greenville is also the geographic context of this inquiry, which centers on the school community of Happy Middle School. Happy is a traditional middle school serving students in grades 6 through 8, with a population of roughly 960 students. The demographic breakdown is estimated at 50% white and 50% minority students. Approximately 30% of the student population is economically disadvantaged, and approximately 10% receive special education services. The school is staffed by a principal, two assistant principals, about 60 certified staff, and 20 classified and support staff. There is an active Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) board that collaborates with the school staff and parents to provide opportunities and support for the school.

Inquiry Partners

The inquiry partners were the school counselors and the instructional coach at the school where the inquiry took place. Each school counselor holds a master's degree in School

Counseling and has worked at the Happy Middle School for more than 5 years. Prior to the start of this inquiry, both participated in a book study of *Middle School Matters* (Fagell, 2019) with the scholarly practitioner. The instructional coach has 29 years of experience, all in middle school, and 17 of those years have been at Happy Middle School. She also holds a master's degree and is invested not only as a staff member but also as the parent of two former students at Happy Middle School. Her instructional experience will be used to plan and execute the CLEs.

Inquiry Design and Rationale

To address these guiding questions, I conducted qualitative research using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design. In PAR, the roles of participants and practitioners are fluid, interchanging, and interdependent. Qualitative research often stems from personal experiences and observed events, prompting researchers to seek common themes and concepts that can inform theory change (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This inductive process positions me as a scholarly practitioner who serves as an instrument for collecting diverse data within the natural school setting. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), meaning-making emerges through the analysis and reflection of these data sources. The design remained flexible, allowing for emergent data to drive the research process. The PAR approach was employed to foster collaboration between parents and school staff, who typically do not work together on parent engagement initiatives. As Hunter et al. (2013) explain, “With its open, dialogic and interactive approach that emphasizes reciprocity, trust and collective action, PAR breaks down the traditional barrier between the researcher and the researched” (p. 26). This approach allowed for diverse vantage points to be understood and fosters mutual learning among all participants. This process allowed participants to not only be co-creators but also co-learners.

Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs)

Structured, participatory, dialogic methodologies in which diverse perspectives from stakeholders, practitioners, and community members come together to share stories and perspectives in order to create actionable solutions to complex organizational or local challenges. This is done by building relational trust and fostering psychological safety. Rooted in principles of democratic engagement and social learning, CLEs intentionally bring together individuals who hold different roles, experiences, and forms of knowledge to learn with and from one another rather than about one another.

As described by Guajardo et al. (2016), CLEs create structured opportunities for participants to cross traditional boundaries, such as those between educators and families, in order to collectively identify assets, challenges, and possibilities for change. Unlike other research methodologies, CLEs center participants as co-learners and co-creators of knowledge, rather than positioning them as subjects of research or recipients of information. This approach acknowledges that meaningful solutions to community-based challenges emerge through dialogue, reflection, and shared understanding rather than top-down decision-making.

For this study, four Community Learning Exchanges were designed as intentional, invitational opportunities to bring together parents, teachers, and school leaders to discuss parent engagement. The CLEs were structured for all participants respond to and reflect on the same prompts, enabling shared dialogue across roles. Through facilitated dialogue and collective reflection, participants engaged in shared learning that supported perspective shifts and the co-creation of new ideas for parent engagement that reflected multiple viewpoints. All CLEs were held in the school's media center and were facilitated by the scholarly practitioner in collaboration with the inquiry partners.

Role of Praxis

The PAR intended to engage in praxis, reflection, and action. Traditional research can be described as extractive, indicating knowledge flows away from the community (Hunter et al, 2013). However, action research operates within the setting, and the knowledge gained can be applied directly. This model directly relates to Freire's (1970) concept that action research is a form of social action, underscoring the importance and necessity of dialogue, particularly that self-sufficiency is incompatible with dialogue. Freire (1970) further indicated that genuine dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguer engages in critical thinking and reflection. It was important to shift the narrative from schools dictating how parents may be involved in their students' school experience to one of genuine collaboration and partnership between parents and their school.

Participants and Recruitment Strategies

The practitioner recruited two groups of participants. First, a group of teachers who are motivated to increase parent involvement in middle school. The practitioner invited current teachers at Happy Middle School who have a history of positive relationships with parents, as well as newer teachers who demonstrate strong potential for positive parent involvement, to participate in the CLEs. Additionally, current parents of Happy Middle School were invited. Advertisements were disseminated via the weekly call and email, as well as on social media and the school's website. The school hosted an open-house style event in the spring for rising 6th-grade families. At this event, parents were informed about it and encouraged to sign up to participate.

Demographics

Participation in all CLEs was voluntary. For CLE 1, which was designed for teachers at

Happy Middle School, I presented the opportunity at a staff meeting and again in the school's weekly memo. In the memo, I included the advertisement (APPENDIX C) and the sign-up link. The link collected demographic information, years of experience, and educational attainment (See Table 1).

Solicitation for the parent CLE began in late spring, when Happy Middle School was already hosting an open house for new families for the coming year. The parents received a flyer that included the registration link. Simultaneously, I solicited current parents through social media and the weekly all-call and email. Parents were asked to register using the link, and their responses were recorded on a Google Sheet. Their demographic information, years of experience as a middle school parent, and educational attainment were collected. This information is presented in Table 2. I requested the same data from both sets in case I needed to compare them during the data analysis.

When I solicited participation for CLE 3, I used the previous methods: social media, an all-call, and email. Despite the intention for full participant return, this was not feasible. I used the same demographic questions as before; however, I added a question about prior participation, as presented in Table 3. The goal was for the school community's demographics to align with the CLEs. However, despite the solicitation, it was not as near a match as planned. In Figure 4, the demographics of the student body and the participants in CLE are compared. In the final CLE, I invited a small group of teachers who had participated in either demographics to align with the CLEs. However, despite the solicitation, it was not as near a match as planned. In Figure 4, the invited a small group of teachers who had participated in either CLE 1 or CLE 3 and had direct knowledge of the co-created events, enabling more intimate and focused dialogue. Their demographic information is presented in Table 4.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants from CLE 1: Teachers

Participant	Role	Gender	Race	Years of Experience	Education Attainment
1	Teacher	Female	White	11	Bachelor's degree
2	Teacher	Female	White	12	Master's degree
3	Teacher	Male	White	10	Master's degree
4	Teacher	Female	White	8	Master's degree
5	Teacher	Female	White	16	Bachelor's degree
6	Teacher	Female	White	3	Bachelor's degree
7	Teacher	Female	White	5	Bachelor's degree
8	Teacher	Male	White	26	Bachelor's degree
9	Teacher	Female	Hispanic	4	Bachelor's degree
10	Teacher	Female	White	16	Bachelor's degree
11	Teacher	Female	White	28	Bachelor's degree
12	Teacher	Male	White	21	Master's degree
13	Teacher	Female	White	12	Bachelor's degree
14	Teacher	Female	White	3.5	Bachelor's degree
15	Teacher	Male	White	10	Master's degree
16	Teacher	Male	White	19	Master's degree
17	Teacher	Female	White	15	Master's degree
18	Teacher	Female	White	8.5	Master's degree
19	Teacher	Female	Black	15	Bachelor's degree
20	Teacher	Male	White	16	Master's degree

Table 2

Demographics of Participants from CLE 2: Parents

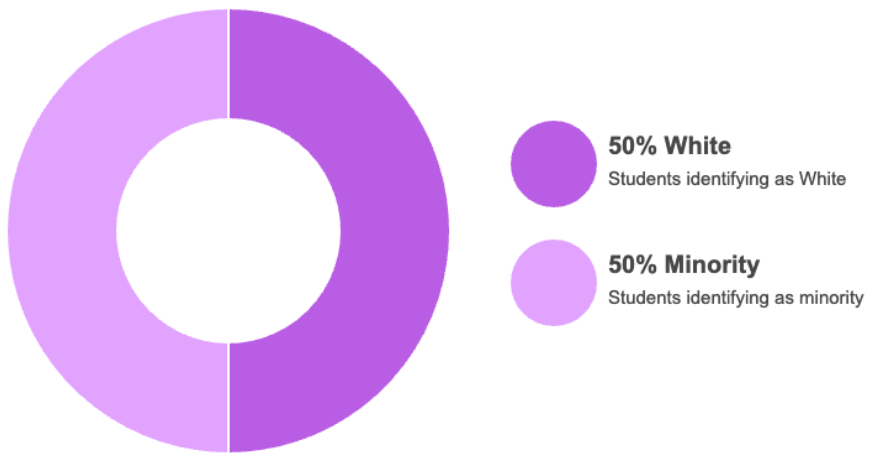
Participant	Role	Gender	Race	Years of Experience	Education Attainment
21	Parent	Female	White	7	Bachelor's degree
22	Parent	Female	Black	1	Bachelor's degree
23	Parent	Female	White	7	Master's degree
24	Parent	Female	White	8	Master's degree
25	Parent	Female	White	2	Some college
26	Parent	Female	Black	1	Bachelor's degree
27	Parent	Female	White	7	Some college
28	Parent	Female	White	5	Bachelor's degree
29	Parent	Male	Hispanic	6	Master's degree
30	Parent	Female	White	1	Bachelor's degree
31	Parent	Female	White	5	Master's degree
32	Parent	Female	White	2	Some college
33	Parent	Female	White	6	Some college

Table 3

Demographics of Participants from CLE 3: Mixed Group of Teachers and Parents

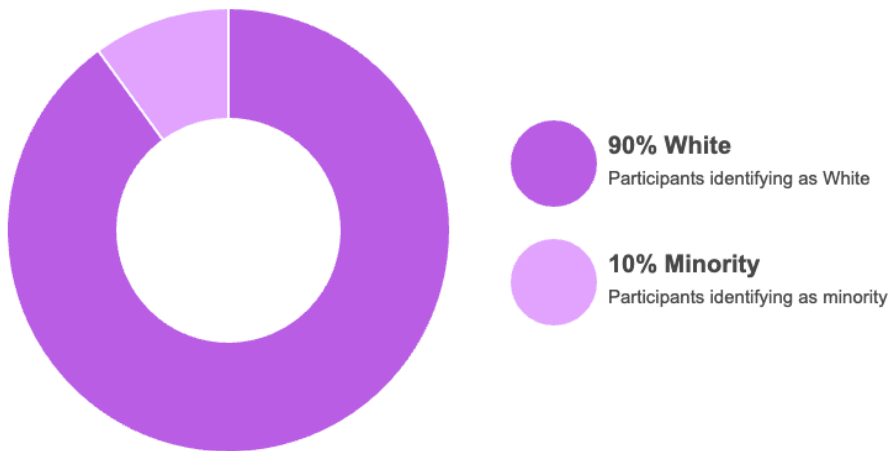
Participant	Role	Gender	Race	Years of Experience	Education Attainment	Prior Participation
4	Teacher	Female	White	8	Master's degree	Yes
6	Teacher	Female	White	3	Bachelor's degree	Yes
7	Teacher	Female	White	5	Bachelor's degree	Yes
11	Teacher	Female	White	28	Master's degree	Yes
17	Teacher	Female	White	16	Master's degree	Yes
21	Parent	Female	White	7	Bachelor's degree	Yes
31	Parent	Female	White	5	Master's degree	Yes
24	Parent	Female	White	8	Master's degree	Yes
28	Parent	Female	White	5	Bachelor's degree	Yes
34	Teacher	Female	White	5	Bachelor's degree	No
35	Teacher	Female	White	27	Master's degree	No
36	Teacher	Female	White	3	Bachelor's degree	No
37	Parent	Female	White	5	Bachelor's degree	No
38	Parent	Female	White	3	Bachelor's degree	No
39	Parent	Female	White	6	Professional	No

Racial Demographics of Happy Middle School Students



Made with Napkin

Racial Demographics of CLE Participants



Made with Napkin

Figure 4: *Demographics Comparison of Happy Middle School and Participants in CLE 3*

Table 4

Demographics of participants in CLE 4: Teacher Reflection

Participant	Role	Gender	Race	Years of Experience	Education Attainment	Prior Participation
3	Teacher	Male	White	10	Master's degree	Yes
7	Teacher	Female	White	5	Bachelor's degree	Yes
13	Teacher	Female	White	12	Bachelor's degree	Yes
15	Teacher	Male	White	10	Master's degree	Yes
16	Teacher	Male	White	19	Master's degree	Yes
17	Teacher	Female	White	15	Master's degree	Yes
18	Teacher	Female	White	8	Master's degree	Yes
19	Teacher	Female	Black	15	Bachelor's degree	Yes
20	Teacher	Male	White	16	Master's degree	Yes

Ethical Considerations

This inquiry adhered to all local and federal ethical standards. In preparation, I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), comprising 13 modules focused on Social/Behavioral Research Investigators and Key Personnel. I completed and passed the required modules prior to conducting any research or data collection. Through these modules, I gained a greater understanding of confidentiality and privacy concerning the participants in this study.

I obtained Internal Review Board (IRB) approval for this inquiry (see Appendix A). I also received approval from the Department of Educational Programs and Services (EPS) at Pitt County Schools, the governing body that authorized the inquiry. This process involved applying to the Assistant Superintendent, in which I described the proposed study and detailed the individuals involved in the inquiry and its purpose.

When I met with participants, I further explained the study's purpose and ensured they understood their rights. This clarified participants' commitment to the inquiry and their roles, enabling them to make informed decisions about whether to continue the study. Participants were informed that they could choose to discontinue their participation at any time. They were made aware of the types of information collected and how their identities would be protected. Participants provided informed consent (see Appendix B) to participate in the learning exchanges.

Pilot Study

The Pilot Study for this inquiry began in late May 2024 with a pre-presentation. These questions were developed in collaboration with the inquiry partners to assess the population of parents whose students would transition from a feeder elementary school. The first question

asked was if this was the participants' first time as a middle school parent. The following three questions asked parents to rate on a 1-5 scale, with one indicating the most nervous or concerned (worst) and five indicating the most prepared/best. Questions 5 and 6 asked about their current involvement in school and their planned involvement for the next year at the inquiry site school. Question 7 asked parents to indicate their preferred discussion topics, and Question 8 asked them to rate their connectedness on a scale of 1-5, with one indicating not connected at all and five indicating completely connected.

The pilot study was conducted with seven parents, a sample of current parents at the inquiry site school who shared similar interests in parental involvement. The survey was administered via Google Forms, and the data were analyzed. Not surprisingly, most of the parents responded that they feel they are involved in their student's school. As Salinas and Jansorn (2003) noted, there is no clear definition of parental involvement. Through this inquiry, the teachers, parents, and the inquiry team will develop a definition that most accurately describes the needs of the school community served at the inquiry site. The pilot study also helped clarify several previously unclear questions. Through discussions with participants, I realized that surveys, particularly those employing rating scales, did not provide a complete picture. This is when I began to search for alternative data collection methods. The responses left me with more questions than answers. I also began to shift my focus from the transition to middle school to parent engagement, with an emphasis on co-creation, as that seemed it could have a greater impact on the school community.

Inquiry Procedures

For this inquiry, there were four distinct data-collection periods. Figure 5 provides an overview of the alignment among the research questions, participatory action research (PAR)

cycles, Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs), and participant groups. This visual organizer illustrates how data collection and analysis were structured across the three inquiry cycles. A Pre-Cycle focused on planning with the inquiry partners and creating the inquiry questions that would drive this study. We began planning the CLEs, designing advertisements to solicit participation, and developing registration forms. Additionally, during this pre-cycle, I finalized the questions for CLE 1 and CLE 2 and began planning for CLE 3 and CLE 4. The data collected in CLE 1 and CLE 2 would inform the focus of the subsequent CLEs.

PAR Cycle 1

During Cycle 1, CLE 1 and CLE 2 focused on collecting data from teachers and parents, respectively. The data collected during this cycle set the stage for the collaboration that would occur during CLE 3 and for the future planning and implementation reflected in CLE 4.

Community Learning Exchange 1: Teachers

The first CLE, focused on teachers, was held in the spring of 2025 in the school's media center. While the goal was to recruit a group that reflected the student body demographics, the twenty participants who attended represented only specific subgroups of the population. The session began with a presentation of the agenda (Appendix D), the informed consent process (Appendix E), and the CLE's guidelines and objectives. To build trust and foster connections, participants were asked to reflect on their personal narratives using three prompt questions:

1. What was your experience like as a middle school student?
2. What was your path to becoming a middle school teacher?
3. What do you remember about your parents' involvement when you were in middle school?"

Participatory Action Research Process for 3 Inquiry Cycles

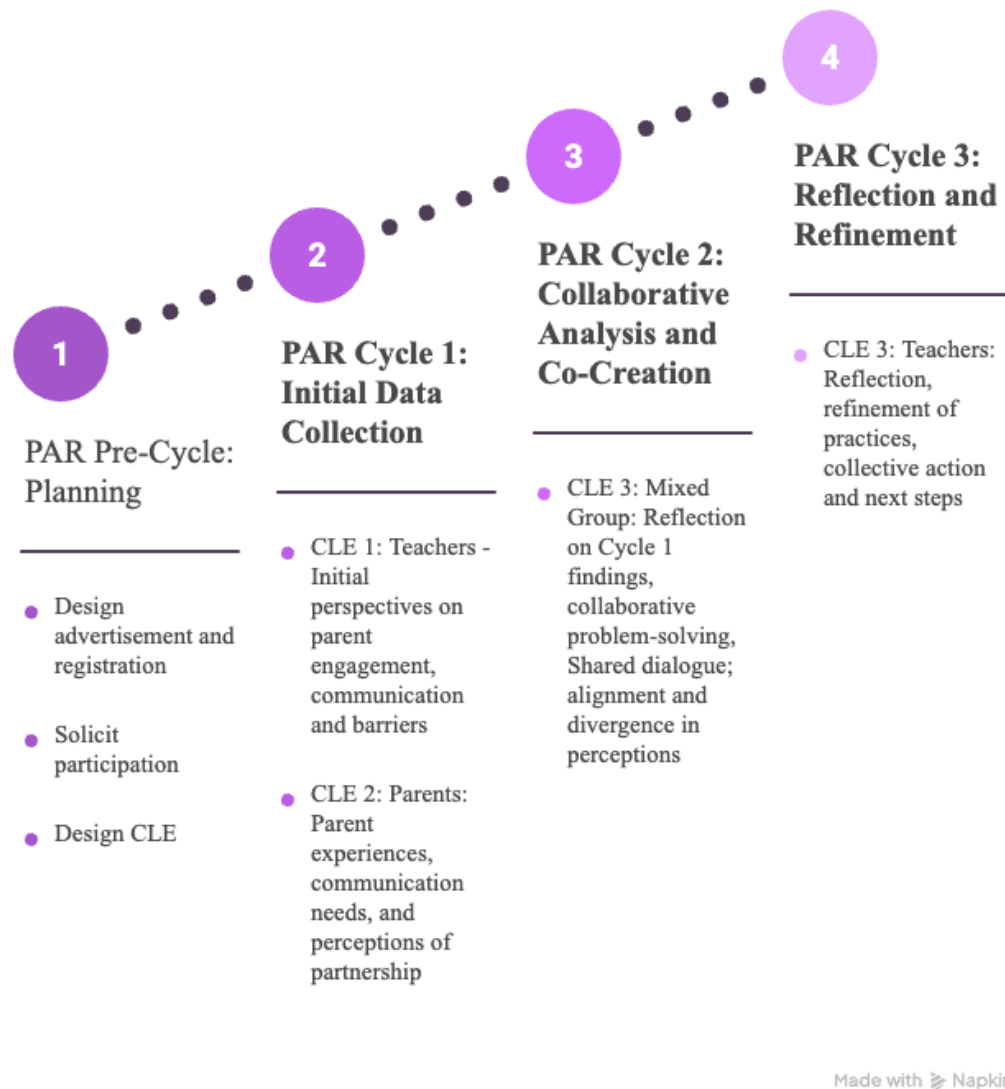


Figure 5: Participatory Action Research Process for 3 Inquiry Cycles

Following the narrative sharing, the groups engaged in a recursive reflective procedure. First, participants considered a question individually. After reflection and note-taking, two participants shared their thoughts. Next, partners shared with another pair. Finally, the group summarized their collective ideas on a blank sheet of paper. They repeated this process three times, answering the following questions:

1. What does meaningful engagement look like to you? (Consider style, topics, frequency, and medium)
2. How does a school community contribute to meaningful engagement?
3. How could parents and school staff create and implement a parent engagement plan? (Consider what it would look like).
4. What impact could a parent engagement plan have on a school community? Student achievement? Student discipline?

At the conclusion of CLE 1, I collected the summarized responses and the posters with Post-it notes affixed. I entered this data into a spreadsheet to identify initial themes and inform adjustments for the subsequent CLE.

Community Learning Exchange 2: Parents

The second CLE, focused on parents, was held in late spring 2025. Recruitment efforts resulted in twenty registrants, with thirteen parents attending. Three of the participants represented minority populations

The procedures for CLE 2 mirrored those of CLE 1. The session opened with a review of the agenda (Appendix F) and informed consent (Appendix G). Participants were asked the same narrative questions used in CLE 1 to elicit authentic perspectives. They then engaged in the same independent reflection, pair-share, and group summarization process used with the teachers. At

the conclusion of CLE 2, the summarized responses and Post-it notes were collected and digitized for analysis and comparison against the CLE 1 data. The information collected in CLE 2 directly addressed two of the inquiry questions regarding parent needs and collaboration strategies.

PAR Cycle 2

Cycle 2 was when collaboration between staff and parents took place. It was also where I began the data analysis. Before CLE 3, I organized the data and sorted it by looking for emerging themes. This would become the points of discussion for CLE 3. CLE 3 was modeled on CLE 1 and CLE 2, in which participants reviewed information, reflected, and responded in small groups, and recorded their responses. Participants were tasked with developing recommendations for school leaders based on the themes identified in teachers' and parents' responses. Additionally, within PAR Cycle 2, two events were designed and implemented based on responses collected during CLE 3

Community Learning Exchange 3: Mixed Group

The third CLE was held in late summer and included a mixed group of teachers and parents. To encourage diverse discourse, I created four small groups of 3-4 participants. After the agenda (Appendix I) was presented, the session opened with a grounding activity (Appendix J) in which participants identified the most significant barrier to parent engagement from their own perspective, and then considered the greatest barrier for their counterparts. This exercise was designed to promote empathic problem-solving. I recorded the shared responses on a T-Chart (Appendix K), which remained displayed for reference throughout the session.

The small groups were then given the questions from CLE 1 and CLE 2, along with summarized responses grouped by theme. They were charged with reading independently and

annotating their reflections. Due to time constraints, the groups focused this activity on the data from two specific questions rather than all four. Following this review, the groups were combined into two larger teams to brainstorm ideas for redesigning two traditional engagement opportunities: Parent Boot Camp and Curriculum Night. The resulting artifacts—posters containing suggestions for school leaders—were collected and synthesized to generate actionable plans for future events.

PAR Cycle 3

The final CLE provided a reflective opportunity for participants to consider what was discovered during the CLEs and the reflect on the two events that resulted from the collaboration in CLE 3. This cycle was conducted with teachers only.

Community Learning Exchange 4: Teacher Reflection

The final CLE was held on a teacher workday following the implementation of the co-created events (Parent Boot Camp and Curriculum Night). I solicited teachers who had participated in either CLE 1 or CLE 3 and had direct knowledge of these events. This session was less structured than previous CLEs, focusing on reflective dialogue regarding the events (Appendix L and M) and the co-creation process itself.

I facilitated a “Plus/Delta” protocol, recording participants' thoughts on T-charts regarding what worked well ("Plus") and what should be reconsidered ("Delta") for future iterations. While the data collected in CLE 2 primarily addressed the first two inquiry questions, the collaborative and reflective data from CLE 3 and CLE 4 provided sufficient information to address all three.

Data Analysis

Data collected at the CLEs will be analyzed using a five-step process described by Creswell and Creswell (2018):

Step 1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis

Step 2. Read or look at all the data

Step 3. Begin coding all the data

Step 4. Generate a description and themes

Step 5. Representing the description and themes

During each CLE, participants recorded their individual thoughts and reflections on sticky notes, which they later affixed to large poster paper on which the questions were posted. After sharing individual perspectives, the groups were charged with summarizing their collective thoughts into a single response. At the conclusion of CLE 1, all individual responses and group responses were entered into individual Google Sheet cells, separated by question for comparison. This enabled me to group responses by ideas and ultimately led to themes in the responses.

To further validate the analysis and confirm the identified themes, I entered the individual data points from the question into OpenAI's ChatGPT to determine the themes of the responses. The overall themes were validated; however, ChatGPT offered an additional analysis of the data, which is outlined in the results section of this chapter. This process was then repeated for CLE 2. For CLE 3, participants were expected to consider the themes derived from CLE 1 and CLE 2 and to make suggestions for school leaders when creating parent engagement opportunities. The themes confirmed by OpenAI were presented to participants in CLE 3. Data collection from CLE 3 consisted of posters created by participants. The noted ideas were organized in Google Sheets cells by theme. I reviewed the information collected in CLE 3 with the inquiry partners and

subsequently planned two parent engagement events. CLE 4 focused on reflection, following the parent events. Participants analyzed the positive aspects of the events and considered ways to improve them and future events. As noted in Chapter 3, the rigor of this inquiry is evident in the triangulation of the data following each CLE. As the CLEs concluded, the inquiry partners supported the research by organizing data, coding, and generating the emerging themes.

Inquiry Design Rigor

The rigor of an inquiry refers to its “quality, validity, accuracy, and credibility of action research and its findings” (Mertler, 2022, p. 167). Evidence of rigor in the inquiry could be demonstrated through the triangulation of data following the CLEs. As the CLEs were conducted, the inquiry partners supported the research by organizing and coding data and generating themes. As the CLEs concluded, the inquiry partners supported the research by organizing data, coding, and generating the emerging themes. The rigor of this inquiry is evident in the triangulation of the data following each CLE. Since I also served as the principal at the inquiry site, I had consistent and prolonged engagement with the inquiry and its participants. As a result, trusting relationships were formed after a level of confidence was established.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

The inquiry engaged up to 20 parents and teachers who committed to participating in 2-3 community learning exchanges. The Scholarly Practitioner’s goal was for the group's demographics to reflect those of the student body, including socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, special education status, and gender. Teachers and parents who are part of the initial events may move unexpectedly or experience major life changes that affect their ability to participate in the follow-up events and/or the CLE they were invited to. Additionally, teachers and parents may have outside contributing factors that impact their engagement with school,

such as work and home responsibilities, or see adequate student success that may lead them to believe their engagement with school is sufficient. Societal norms of a decline in parent engagement at the secondary level may skew a parent's perspective.

For this inquiry, it is assumed that the teachers and parents participating provide honest responses and engage fully in dialogue during the Community Learning Exchanges. It can be assumed that some parents may not understand how to be involved in their student's schooling, and they choose to participate in the exchange, seeking to understand. Others may participate in the inquiry, believing they are already involved and have suggestions for how the school can improve. Similarly, it can be assumed that a teacher choosing to participate already engages with parents. Another assumption is that both the teacher and parents in this study seek a deeper connection with their school community. Lastly, it is assumed that staff and teachers are interested in collaborating with parents to co-create a plan to increase parent engagement.

Role of the Scholarly Practitioner

As the scholarly practitioner leading this inquiry, I also serve as the principal of the inquiry site. With 18 years of experience in education, eleven of which have been dedicated to working with middle school students as either a teacher or administrator. In addition to my role as a principal, I am also a parent of three school-aged students, giving me firsthand insight into the need for safe, stress-free ways for parents to engage while managing busy family schedules. Understanding how to participate outside traditional avenues, such as PTA membership or chaperoning a field trip, is personally important and further fuels my investment in this inquiry. This dual perspective as both practitioner and parent allows me to approach the data objectively, setting aside biases and presuppositions to analyze survey responses as raw data in the spirit of

continuous improvement. I am committed to adapting our strategies to meet the evolving needs of families.

Summary

To conclude, this chapter elaborated on the inquiry's guiding questions and context, establishing the framework of the inquiry. It outlined the Participatory Action Research design, the rationale for using the Community Learning Exchange methodology. Participants, recruitment strategies, and demographics are presented. Furthermore, the inquiry procedures across the three cycles was explained and details about how the data was analyzed and how design rigor protected. The chapter concluded with delimitations, limitations, assumptions, and the role of the scholarly practitioner, setting the stage for the presentation of findings in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to co-create a parent engagement plan that sought parent input to increase parent engagement and involvement during a student's middle school years. Rather than telling parents how to be engaged, this study created opportunities for schools and parents to collaborate to develop ideas for jointly addressing the decline in parent engagement in middle school. This study took place in a high-achieving middle school in rural Eastern North Carolina, where I serve as principal. This inquiry aimed to identify ways schools and parents can stay involved for the betterment of a student's academic achievement and for the improvement of the school community. It stands out for emphasizing how parents and schools can co-create meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships to support students. Unlike other studies that primarily focused on increasing parent involvement through either parent-led efforts or school-based functions, this approach sought to foster collaboration between both entities. As a middle school principal, I recognized the critical importance of this work. The challenges associated with the transition to middle school and the typical decline in parental involvement underscore the need for a comprehensive, co-created parent engagement program. As a parent, I also recognize the importance of this work as I have found myself disengaged from my children's school, at both the elementary and secondary levels. The current programming of parent engagement opportunities offered at my children's schools feels forced, unwelcome, and overall, stressful.

As presented in Chapter 3, I used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design to address these guiding questions. PAR roles of participants and practitioners are fluid, interchanging, and interdependent. I gathered qualitative data by recording personal experiences and observations, which revealed common themes and concepts that informed theory change. I

specifically chose the PAR approach to foster collaboration between parents and school staff, who do not typically work together on parent engagement initiatives. This approach allowed for diverse perspectives to be understood and fostered mutual learning among all participants.

Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs) served as the vehicle for data collection and collaboration in this study. Four learning exchanges were conducted as part of this study. All of these CLEs were held in the school's media center and hosted by the scholarly practitioner and the inquiry partners. Participants completed 1, 2, or 3 CLEs, sharing their perspectives, understanding others' barriers, and generating new ideas through collaboration. The interventions that came as a result of the CLEs were two events the scholarly practitioner and inquiry partners designed: Parent Boot Camp and Curriculum, Community and Conference Carnival. It was essential to shift the narrative from schools dictating how parents may be involved in their students' school experience to fostering genuine collaboration and partnership between parents and their schools. The guiding questions for this inquiry were:

1. What do parents need and want in terms of parent engagement to increase parent involvement in middle school?
2. How do parents and school staff collaborate to create and implement a parent engagement plan?
3. How has co-creating a model for parent involvement impacted me as a school leader?

While examining the themes that emerged in response to the inquiry questions and the qualitative data collected throughout the Community Learning Exchanges, a framework was developed. Five critical factors emerged, not as isolated elements but as a continuous cycle necessary to co-create opportunities for parent engagement. These factors are: Understanding barriers, improved communication, fostering collaboration, building trust, and enhancing

engagement. This chapter details these findings, illustrating how these factors interact to shift the paradigm from traditional school-directed involvement to a dynamic, co-created partnership. This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation for each phase of the inquiry. Additionally, the study participants' demographics will be presented, and I will further explain the solicitation and recruitment phase. The chapter will conclude with the results of this inquiry.

Results

The results of this inquiry are organized by the three Participatory Action Research cycles and the four Community Learning Exchanges that drove the inquiry are presented in Table 5. Within this framework, the themes that were derived from participant responses in the first two CLEs were analyzed and then further validated using OpenAI's ChatGPT. Once confirmed, these themes were used as the basis of the collaborative work that would take place in CLE 3. The collaborative dialogue resulted in the design and implementation of two parent engagement events. The concluding cycle, CLE 4, was the reflective phase where a targeted group evaluated the events successes and areas for improvement.

Pre-Cycle and Cycle 1

PAR Pre-Cycle and Cycle 1 created the foundation for this inquiry. During the Pre-Cycle phase, I used the inquiry questions to develop discussion questions for the CLEs. I also solicited participation in CLE 1 and CLE 2 and secured the necessary resources and meeting space. Cycle 1 was designed to encompass both CLE 1 and CLE 2, which were identified as the primary data collection CLEs. CLE 1 focused on gathering data from teachers and CLE 2 focused on gathering data from parents.-

Table 5

Summary of Themes Derived from Community Learning Exchanges 1-4

Community Learning Exchange	Participants	Themes
1	Teachers	• Trust-Centered Relationships as the Foundation for Engagement • Consistent, Accessible, and Multi-Modal Communication • Shared Ownership Through Collaborative and Inclusive Partnerships • Intentional, Practical, and Student-Centered Engagement Practices
2	Parents	• Communication Must Be Open and Ongoing with Clear and Accessible Information • Collaboration and Partnership is Necessary for Community, Connection and Belonging • Parent Engagement Opportunities Must Be Intentional, Accessible and Inclusive • A Positive School Culture Promotes Student Motivation, Self-Advocacy, Student Growth, Resulting in Reduced Discipline Issues
3	Mixed Group: Teachers & Parents	• Barriers: Time and scheduling constraints; Communication breakdown; School size; Relational challenges • What does meaningful engagement look like to you? Standardized and inclusive • How does a school community contribute to meaningful engagement? Creating flexible access through communication in order to build a mutually respectful space • How could parents and school staff create and implement a parent engagement plan? Suggestions for school leaders. Through collaborative events and parent workshops communicated through a standardized messaging system • What impact could a parent engagement plan have on a school community? Suggestions for school leaders. Organize free, fun and non-academic events

Community Learning Exchange	Participants	Parent Boot Camp	Curriculum, Community Conference Carnival
4	Teachers	Plus (+): The session was well-paced and covered essential start-of-year information (logistics, schedules, supplies), while giving parents the chance to connect with the administrative team. Delta (–): Future iterations could be more inclusive and accessible by adding athletics information, inviting all new families (not just 6th grade), and offering a virtual option for working parents.	Plus (+): Strong community engagement with over 20 booths, festive décor, flexible scheduling, and attendance that—despite being low—was significantly higher than similar past events. Delta (–): Future events could improve clarity and participation by addressing scheduling conflicts, streamlining entry/exit logistics, adding meal options (e.g., food trucks), and rethinking the format of curriculum presentations.

Community Learning Exchange 1: Teachers

During CLE 1, teachers at Happy Middle School were tasked with individually and then in small groups to consider questions related to parent engagement. The questions posed to participants were: “What does meaningful engagement look like to you? Consider style, topics, frequency, and medium.” “How does a school community contribute to meaningful engagement?” “How could parents and school staff create and implement a parent engagement plan? Consider what it would look like.” and “What impact could a parent engagement plan have on a school community? Student achievement? Student discipline?” The themes that emerged from are organized in Table 6.

Theme 1: Trust-Centered Relationships as the Foundation for Engagement. Teachers agreed that intentionally engaging parents in meaningful ways early in the academic year, rather than limiting interactions to report card periods, was critical to establishing trust-centered relationships. Participants emphasized the importance of family engagement beginning at the start of the school year and continuing consistently throughout the school year. One teacher noted that “parents need to be engaged earlier in the year,” and another stressed the importance of “pulling parents in ASAP at the beginning of the school year.” Early and ongoing engagement was viewed as a foundation for building trust, fostering collaboration, and strengthening relationships between families and educators.

Teachers further indicated that meaningful engagement is supported by a collective sense of responsibility within the school community, a theme further described below. Teacher participants highlighted the value of partnerships with the broader community, including local organizations, churches, and businesses, as a means of reinforcing shared responsibility for student success and well-being within our community as a whole. Teachers noted that companies

Table 6

Summary of Themes Derived from Community Learning Exchanges 1-4

Theme	Frequency of Response	Example Quote(s)
Trust-Centered Relationships as the Foundation for Engagement	11	“we need to pull parents in ASAP”; “People feel more comfortable and willing to collaborate when they are surrounded by others they trust.”; “If parents are involved, they will learn to trust the schools, which will only positively impact their student.”;
Consistent, Accessible, and Multi-Modal Communication	14	“New world of technology, social media has to be used.”; Teachers need parental support to succeed, parents need communication to feel like they are part of the success.”; “All calls/emails should be regular and predictable, parents should know when updates are coming and what is expected of them.” “Communication is the key to success in every relationship, schools are no different.”
Shared Ownership Through Collaborative and Inclusive Partnerships	11	“A parent meaningfully engages in their child’s education by placing value on it as part of the culture of their home”; “It takes a village, it’s a shared responsibility.”; “Parent need reasons to love their school, we need to give them every reason to love and trust us.”; “Positive comments really help elevate the image of a school.”; “Co-create, open discussions of potential barriers.”; “Host parent meetings, just ask what they think or what they need.”; “Regularly ask for feedback, but then use it!”
Intentional, Practical, and Student-Centered Engagement Practices	9	“Parents need time to interact with other parents (what’s normal?)”; “Parents need to be trained how to use PowerSchool, iReady and Canvas.”; “Revamp Open House”; “We need to change Open House to make it meaningful”; “Don’t plan events no one wants to do!”;

must engage with schools to ensure that we are developing their future workforce. In addition, teachers emphasized the importance of inclusive engagement practices that extend beyond parents to include other family members, such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles, thereby broadening support networks for students, recognizing that “family” looks different in every home. One teacher noted “normalizing ‘different’ family makeup.”

As described in more detail below, consistent and effective communication emerged as a theme and as a key mechanism for building trust and promoting mutual understanding between families and educators. Teachers noted that when parents play a more active role in the educational process, trust is strengthened, as reflected by one participant’s observation that “if parents are playing a larger role...it would foster trust.” Teachers also consistently linked parent engagement to improved student outcomes, including increased motivation, effort, and academic achievement. Teachers referenced “increased motivation” and “more student effort because parents monitor academic progress, noting that aligned expectations between home and school positively influence both student achievement and growth.

In addition to academic outcomes, teachers identified a positive relationship between parent engagement and student behavior and discipline. It was noted that when behavioral expectations are shared between home and school, there were fewer discipline issues and higher levels of accountability for both behavior and academics. As one teacher explained, when “parents back us up, kids are held accountable,” resulting in a reduction in undesirable classroom behaviors and in students meeting our shared high expectations.

Finally, teachers emphasized that parent engagement increases the overall sense of community and belonging among students, families, and staff. It was suggested that when families feel connected to and feel proud of their school community, they are more likely to

become and remain involved. One teacher summarized this connection by stating that “school pride creates more inclusion.”

Theme 2: Consistent, Accessible, and Multi-Modal Communication. The second theme that emerged from CLE 1 was the need for consistent and meaningful communication. Teachers agreed that family engagement depends on communication that is reliable, frequent, and delivered through multiple and accessible channels. Teachers provided examples of using a variety of platforms, including phone calls, texts, emails, social media, and applications such as Remind, Canvas, Google Calendar, and Dojo. However, by using a variety of methods, the school can ensure that information reaches families in a timely and effective manner. One veteran teacher noted that “flyers home don’t work,” explaining that they often do not get students’ bookbags and can result in wasted time and resources. Teachers also emphasized the value families place on transparency and timely, relevant, and purposeful updates, rather than generic announcements. Examples included communication related to safety (e.g., lockdown drills) and important dates that help sustain engagement. Teachers consistently identified clear, predictable communication routines as essential throughout CLE 1. They explained that when schools maintain a consistent format and timing, parents are better able to anticipate updates, understand expectations, and follow up appropriately. Teachers also emphasized the importance of seeking feedback from families with the intention of using it meaningfully, therefore reinforcing trust and shared responsibility. A veteran teacher noted, “We must be vulnerable to hear that we may not be doing a great job communicating.” Others agreed that this would be the only way to improve.

Additionally, participants highlighted that the growing diversity of the school community, including language accessibility and equitable access to resources, was equally critical to

communicating with our families without these barriers. The need for inclusive communication practices has become overwhelming need. Technology was discussed as a valuable tool for expanding and streamlining engagement; however, its practical use by teachers and parents requires appropriate training. Overall, teachers agreed that it remains the school's responsibility to establish and sustain clear, consistent, transparent, and multi-channel communication as a foundation for meaningful family engagement.

Theme 3: Shared Ownership Through Collaborative and Inclusive Partnerships.

The third theme that emerged was that, while parents want access to information about their students and schools, they often need explicit support or instruction to navigate the school's platforms effectively. Teachers noted that families may benefit from practical instruction in accessing school communication tools, locating key information, and monitoring student progress and performance. Teachers suggested offering parent workshops focused on school platforms to build parent confidence and capacity for engagement. As parents engage, opportunities for relationship-building and community connection will naturally occur. Teachers noted that parents, like educators, value opportunities for relational interaction. Teachers indicated that engagement events should be welcoming, social, and community-oriented rather than solely academic. This prompted multiple calls to reevaluate traditional formats such as Open House and curriculum nights. Teachers described these events as "outdated" and "chaotic," suggesting that they be replaced with more interactive and meaningful opportunities that foster connections within the school community.

Co-creation and shared ownership also emerged as essential components of effective parent engagement. Teachers emphasized the importance of open communication to identify barriers to parent involvement. They agreed that engagement plans should be developed

collaboratively rather than through top-down or school leadership-only decision-making. Teachers highlighted the importance of intentionally including diverse and underrepresented voices, noting that these perspectives are critical to creating equitable and impactful engagement practices. Closely connected to this theme was the emphasis on continuous feedback and improvement, as mentioned previously, with teachers recommending that schools regularly solicit parent input throughout the planning and implementation of initiatives and events. One teacher noted the importance of reaching beyond traditional groups, such as the PTA, to engage families whose voices may otherwise be absent due to differing levels of access or availability.

Teachers also stressed the importance of clearly defined roles, expectations, and boundaries to support purposeful and equitable engagement. They noted that both parents and staff need clarity regarding responsibilities and time commitments to ensure mutual respect and sustainability. Teachers emphasized setting transparent expectations for participation, such as the maximum duration or commitment of after-hours events, and establishing guidelines for volunteering that promote inclusion and emotional safety of all. Overall, teachers agreed that the most impactful parent engagement efforts are those that foster a strong sense of partnership between home and school, grounded in shared responsibility, shared accountability, and collective commitment to common goals.

Theme 4: Intentional, Practical, and Student-Centered Engagement Practices.

Teachers further noted that meaningful engagement supports parents in addressing the development of the whole child, not solely academic performance. Participants suggested that engagement opportunities should place less emphasis on curriculum and greater focus on topics such as self-regulation, social awareness, student accomplishments, and typical developmental behaviors (e.g., characteristics of seventh-grade learners), as this information better equips

parents to support their children's emotional, behavioral, and social growth. Teachers emphasized that effective engagement requires a shared responsibility between parents and the school. This looks like active participation, respectful and consistent dialogue, and clearly defined boundaries. This will ensure that neither group assumes control over the other, yet stays balanced in support of the student. Participants noted that when parents model positive behaviors at home, communicate respectfully, and contribute in tangible ways, their efforts reinforce the importance of school. Teachers agreed that for engagement to be truly impactful, it must be grounded in trust, personal connection, and relevance. As one teacher noted, "if someone is invested, they want to be involved." They further noted that offering engagement opportunities in varied formats is essential to meeting families where they are and making participation manageable. Participants stressed that engagement opportunities must be practical, sustainable for both the parent and the teacher, with consistent expectations. Flexible, realistic, manageable and inclusive were also identified as critical, with suggestions to include offering both morning and evening events and leveraging virtual opportunities to engage families who are unable to attend in person.

The artifacts produced for this CLE (Figures 6-9) included posters on which teachers initially recorded their perspectives on sticky notes. After sharing their ideas, the notes were affixed to the posters. Along with the summarized responses from the small groups, the data gathered from these sticky notes were organized to identify emerging themes presented above.

Community Learning Exchange 2: Parents

Structured similarly to CLE 1, CLE 2, however, was focused on parents at Happy Middle School. They were also tasked with considering questions related to parent engagement individually and in small groups. The questions posed to participants were similar, but with an

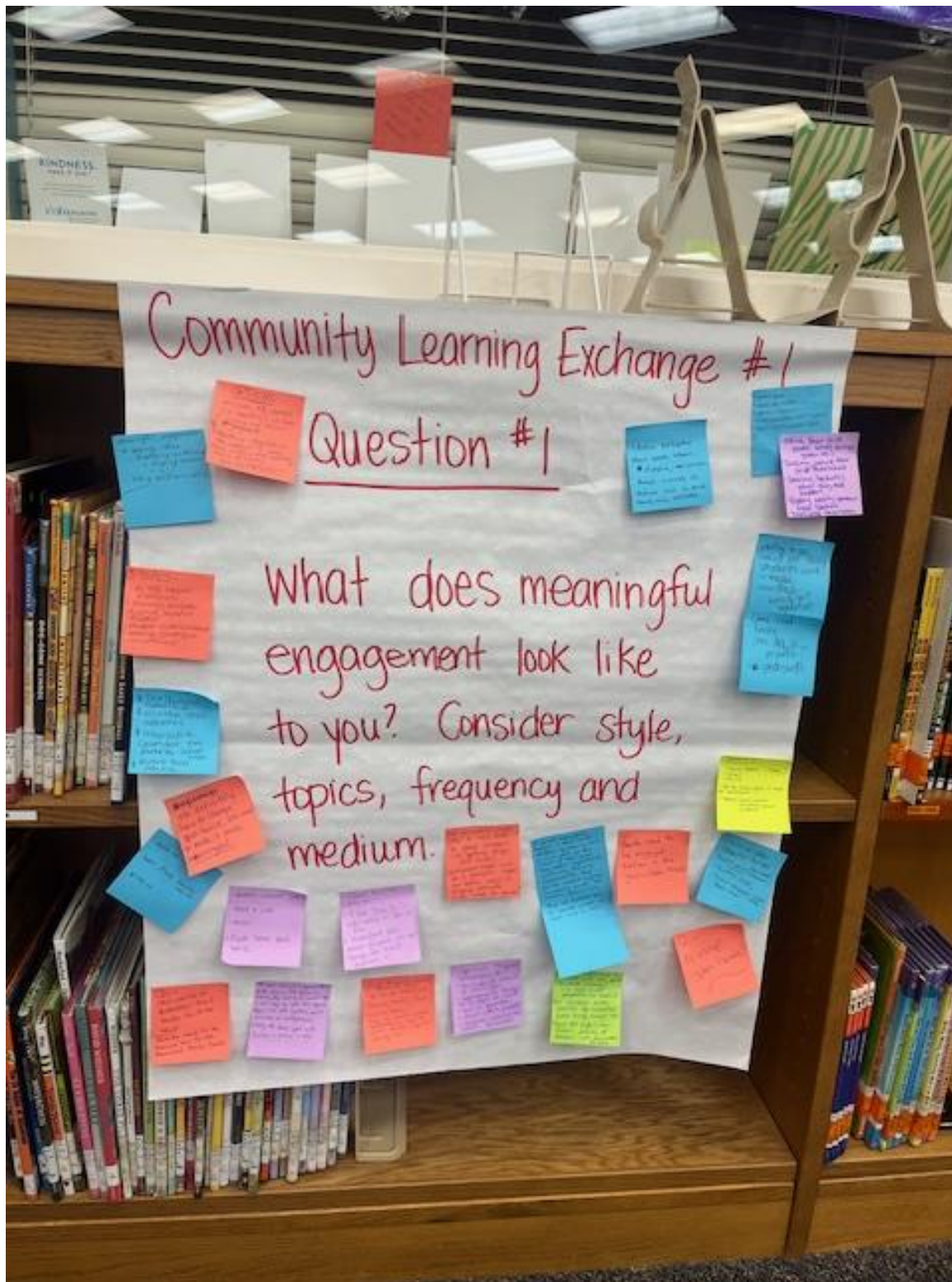


Figure 6: Community Learning Exchange #1 Artifact: Teachers' Response to Question #1

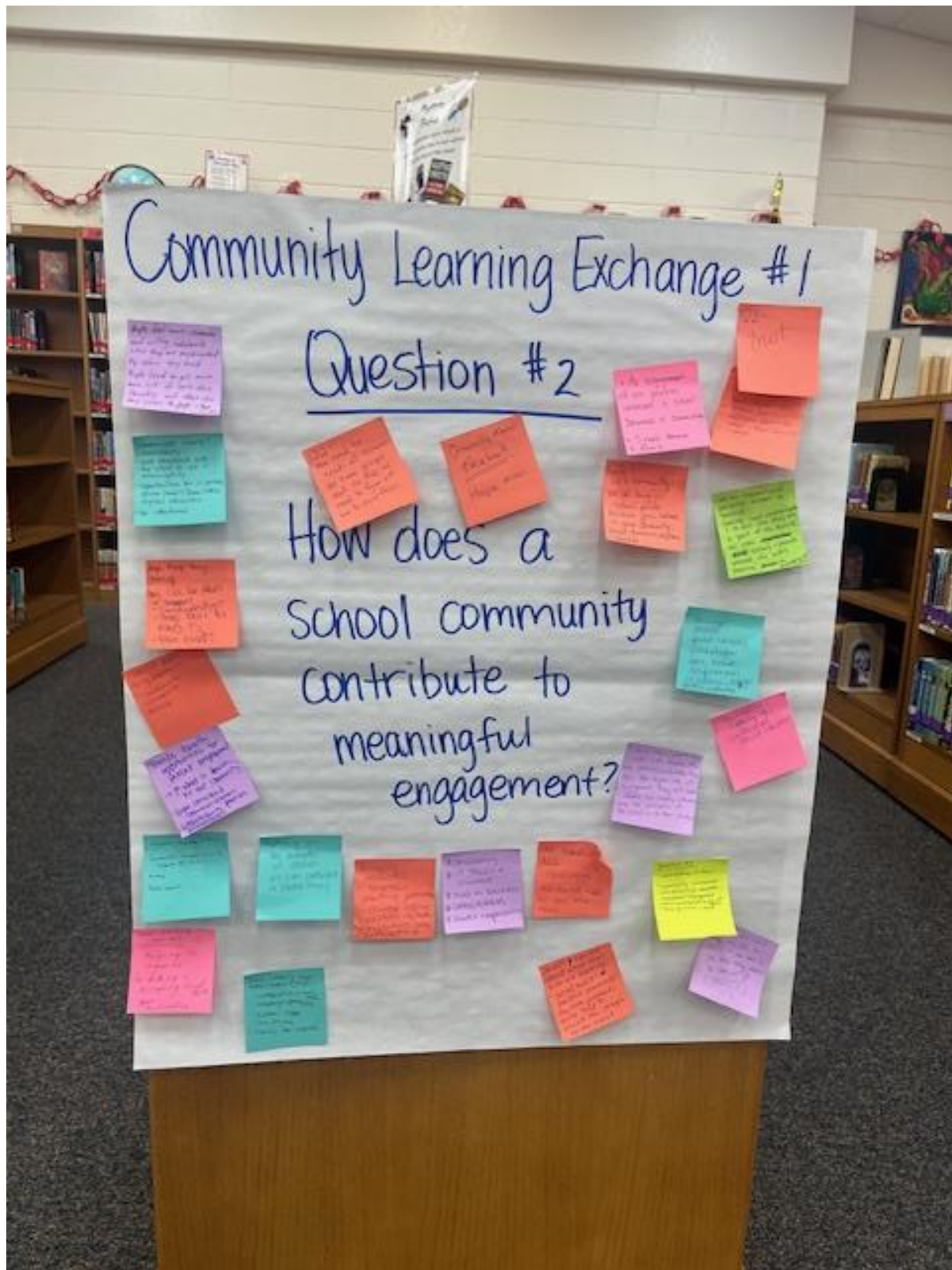


Figure 7: Community Learning Exchange #1 Artifact: Teachers' Response to Question # 2

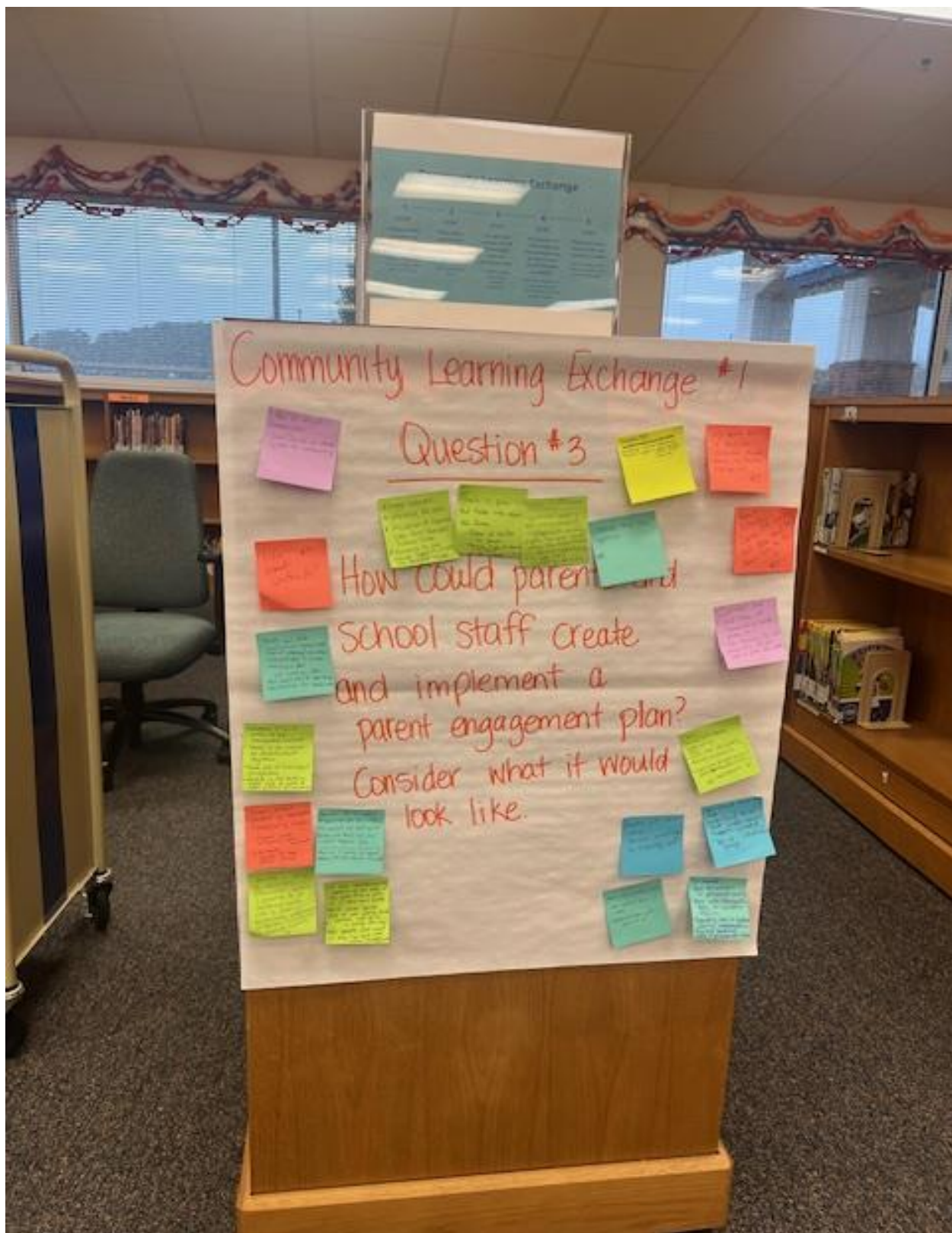


Figure 8: *Community Learning Exchange #1 Artifact: Teachers' Response to Question # 3*

emphasis on the parent perspective: “What does meaningful engagement look like to you? Consider style, topics, frequency, and medium.” “How does the parent community contribute to meaningful engagement?”, “How could parents and school staff create and implement a parent engagement plan? Consider what it would look like.”, and “What impact could a parent engagement plan have on a school community? Student achievement? Student discipline?” The themes that emerged from are organized in Table 7.

Theme 1: Communication Must Be Open and Ongoing with Clear and Accessible Information. Parents’ feedback closely aligned with teachers’ perspectives regarding the importance of open and ongoing communication. Parents emphasized that communication should be intentionally inviting and transparent, fostering reciprocal exchanges between home and school. Communication was discussed throughout the CLE as essential to a collaborative relationship and to meaningful parent engagement. One parent suggested that weekly communications be archived on the school website; this would provide convenient access and underscore the value of a centralized communication hub, as several parents noted. Additionally, parents highlighted the importance of positive communication practices in establishing rapport and strengthening relationships with teachers and school staff, which they viewed as critical to sustaining effective engagement.

Theme 2: Collaboration and Partnership are Necessary for Community, Connection, and Belonging. Another point emphasized by parents was the importance of teachers and families working together as partners. Noting that when they recognize and value one another’s perspectives, parents and teachers alike are more willing to collaborate. One parent expressed curiosity about how families might “lighten the load of the teacher.” This highlights a desire for collaboration grounded in mutual respect, empathy, and shared responsibility, and would be a

Table 7

Summary of Themes Derived from Community Learning Exchange 2: Parents

Theme	Frequency of Response	Example Quote(s)
Communication Must Be Open and Ongoing with Clear and Accessible Information	12	“Communication should be frequent and consistent with delivery.”; “Communication should be purposeful.”; “Make better use of the school website.”; “Positive communication opens lines to connect and creates rapport.”; “Parents must contribute to ongoing communication, not just rely on schools.”; “There needs to be opportunities for parents to give feedback.”
Collaboration and Partnership is Necessary for Community, Connection and Belonging	10	“Both groups should be willing to shared what’s going well, and also share ideas to make it better.”; “Parents want to know how to lighten the load of their teachers.”; “Active engagement by parents through communication and understanding, creates partnerships.”; “Schools can suggest how parents can be involved away from school or not during the school day.”; “Schools must be willing to consider feedback for improvement.”
Parent Engagement Opportunities Must Be Intentional, Accessible and Inclusive	8	“Find the balance between saturated activities and not enough activities.”; “Parents need to be willing to do what’s needed, not just what they think is needed.”
A Positive School Culture Promotes Student Motivation, Self-Advocacy, Student Growth, Resulting in Reduced Discipline Issues	8	“Parents can join committees like the POT to actively and intentionally participate.”; “Parents can help with homework, ask how their student’s day was to engage at home. This can help coach them to tackle the next day with success.”; “When parents and teachers are a team, rule are enforced at home and school, then discipline is improved.”; “Involved parents lower discipline referrals.”; “When student feel supported by those around them, they begin to self-advocate.”; “Involved parents see increased student success.”

welcome change for schools. Parents noted that collaborative partnerships support collective problem-solving and strengthen relationships between home and school. However, discussions also revealed that some parents are uncertain about how to engage meaningfully, which can create barriers to participation. While one participant emphasized the importance of engagement by stating in all caps “SHOW UP,” parents acknowledged that such directives may feel intimidating for those who lack clarity about expectations, even as they underscore the simplicity of taking an initial step toward involvement.

A closely related theme that emerged was connection and community-building. Parents indicated that regular and purposeful sharing of information would help them feel more connected to the school. Thus, making it easier to see themselves as part of the broader school community. The parent participant group agreed that meaningful engagement extends beyond announcements and creates opportunities for authentic connection. This also contributes to a “sense of belonging” that encourages both parents and students to engage with confidence. To support this, parents suggested several strategies for meaningful engagement, including joining the PTA, asking teachers what they specifically need to support engagement, creating a “Sports class officer” position, “asking for schools to share their identified needs and parents stepping up to fill the gaps,” and holding “quarterly PTA meetings that are intentional and parents understand the expectation/structure of the meeting.”

Theme 3: Parent Engagement Opportunities Must Be Intentional, Accessible, and Inclusive. Another theme that emerged was the need for purposeful parent engagement. Parents emphasized the importance of balancing engagement efforts so that they are meaningful without becoming overwhelming or superficial. They noted that effective engagement should provide families with access to the tools and resources necessary to support student success. One parent

suggested “making better use of the website,” particularly by organizing the various apps and platforms parents can access for information.

Theme 4: A Positive School Culture Promotes Student Motivation, Self-Advocacy, Student Growth, Resulting in Reduced Discipline Issues. Parents noted that engagement practices such as “asking questions, reinforcing schedules and good habits at home,” and “receiving communication from school” better position them to support their students. Parents noted they appreciated being asked for feedback; one parent also emphasized the importance of demonstrating “how suggestions or feedback are considered and put in place to improve.” They noted that this transparency builds trust between families and schools and reinforces the value of parental input. Parents expressed strong beliefs in the importance of their involvement in a parent engagement plan and its potential to positively influence the school community and student achievement, not only for their own children but for all students and teachers. One parent suggested that school communication can help establish a “culture of parents and teachers” rather than a “parents versus teachers” dynamic, thereby supporting student success. Another parent noted that when relationships between families and educators are established, parents are more likely to come forward and share concerns such as “my student is struggling” and “I don’t know how to help them.” Reflecting on prior experiences, one parent shared that “algebra/8th grade was awful” and that this was when their child “fell way behind,” illustrating the hesitation or insecurity some parents may feel when supporting a struggling student. Parents agreed that when “the school community comes together, everyone feels included,” and that even parents who find it uncomfortable to assist with academic content, such as math homework, may offer other valuable skill sets that contribute meaningfully to the school community. The artifacts produced for this CLE (Figures 10-13) included posters on which parents initially recorded their

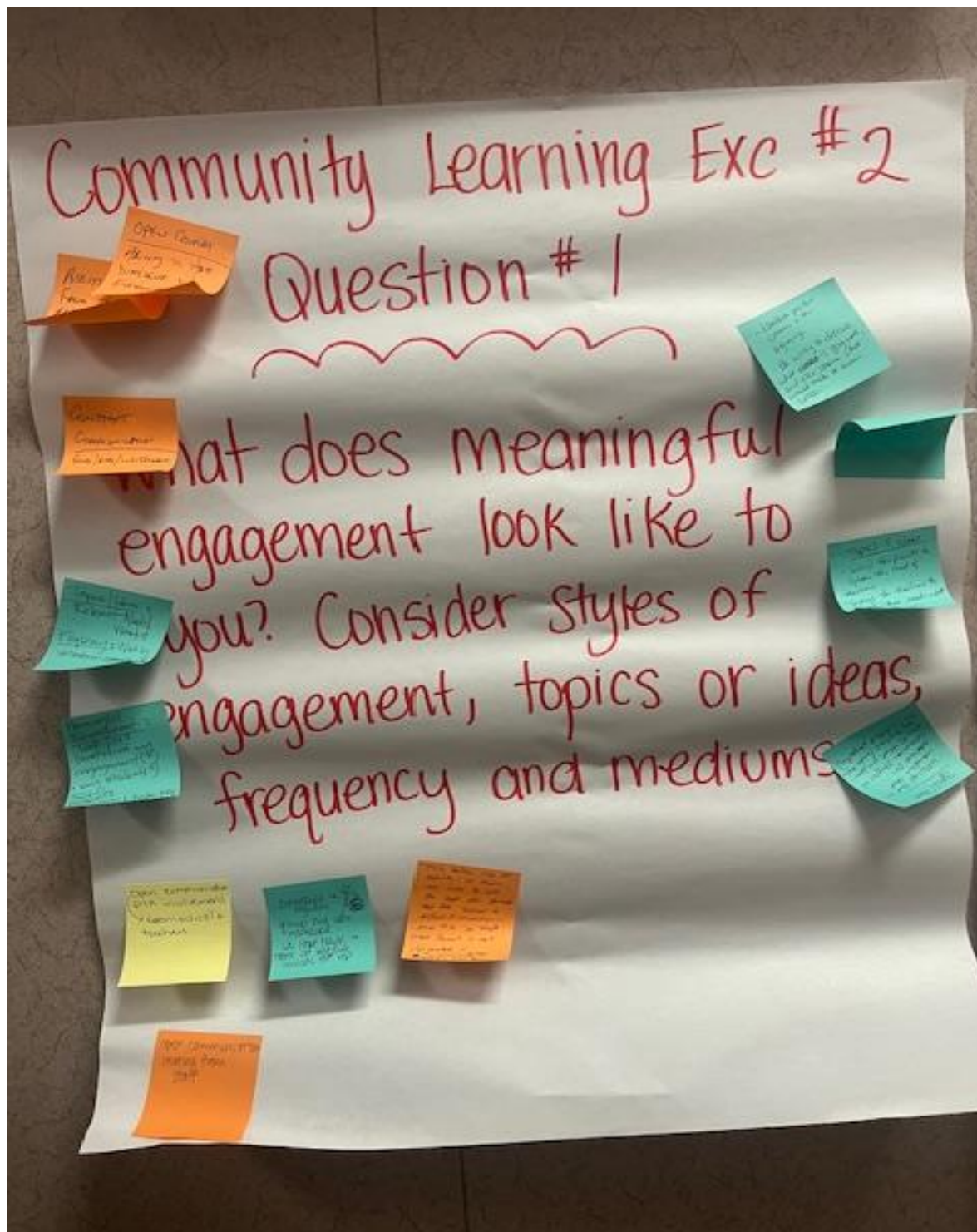


Figure 10: Community Learning Exchange #2 Artifact: Parents' Response to Question #1

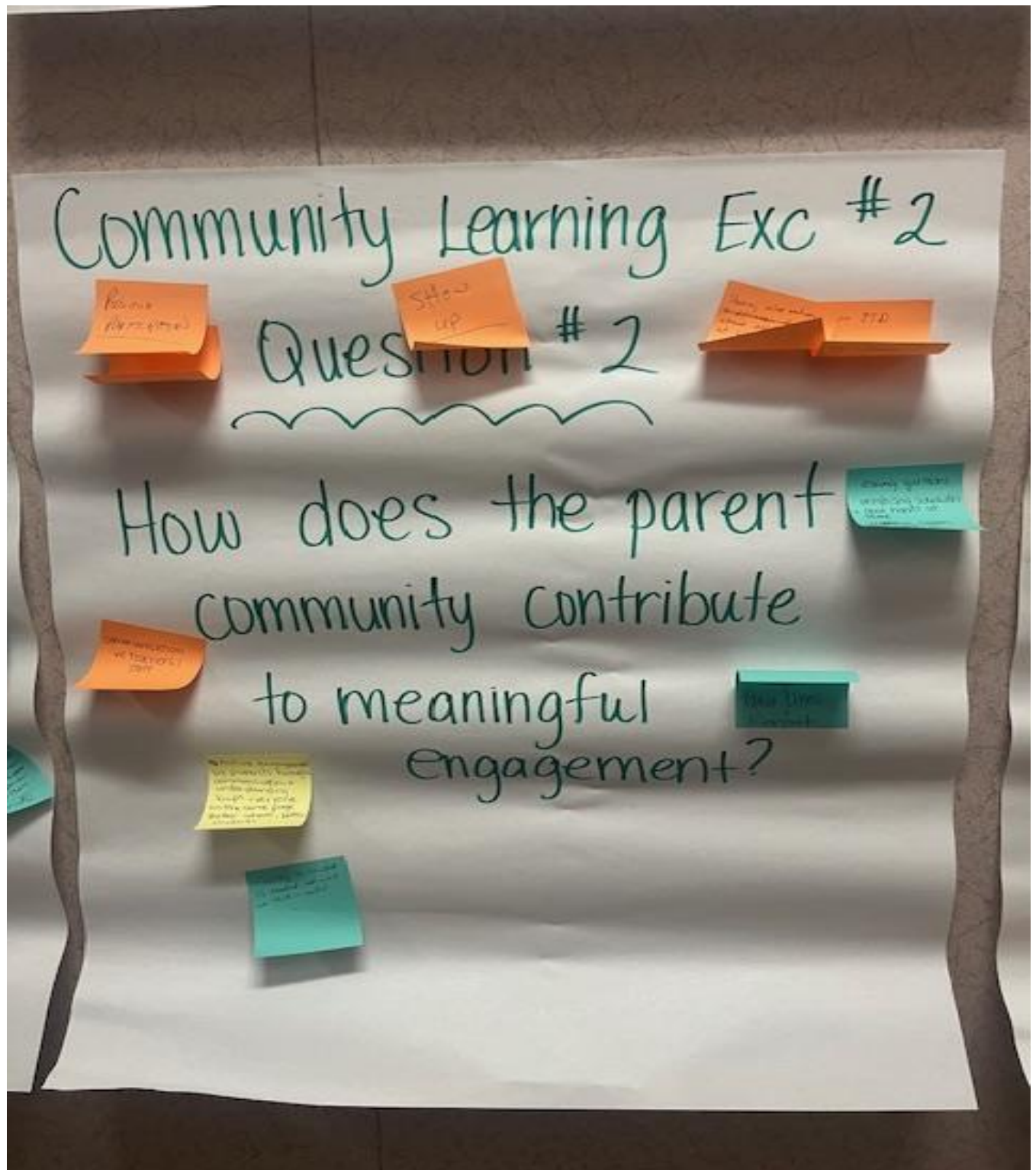


Figure 11: Community Learning Exchange #2 Artifact: Parents' Response to Question #2

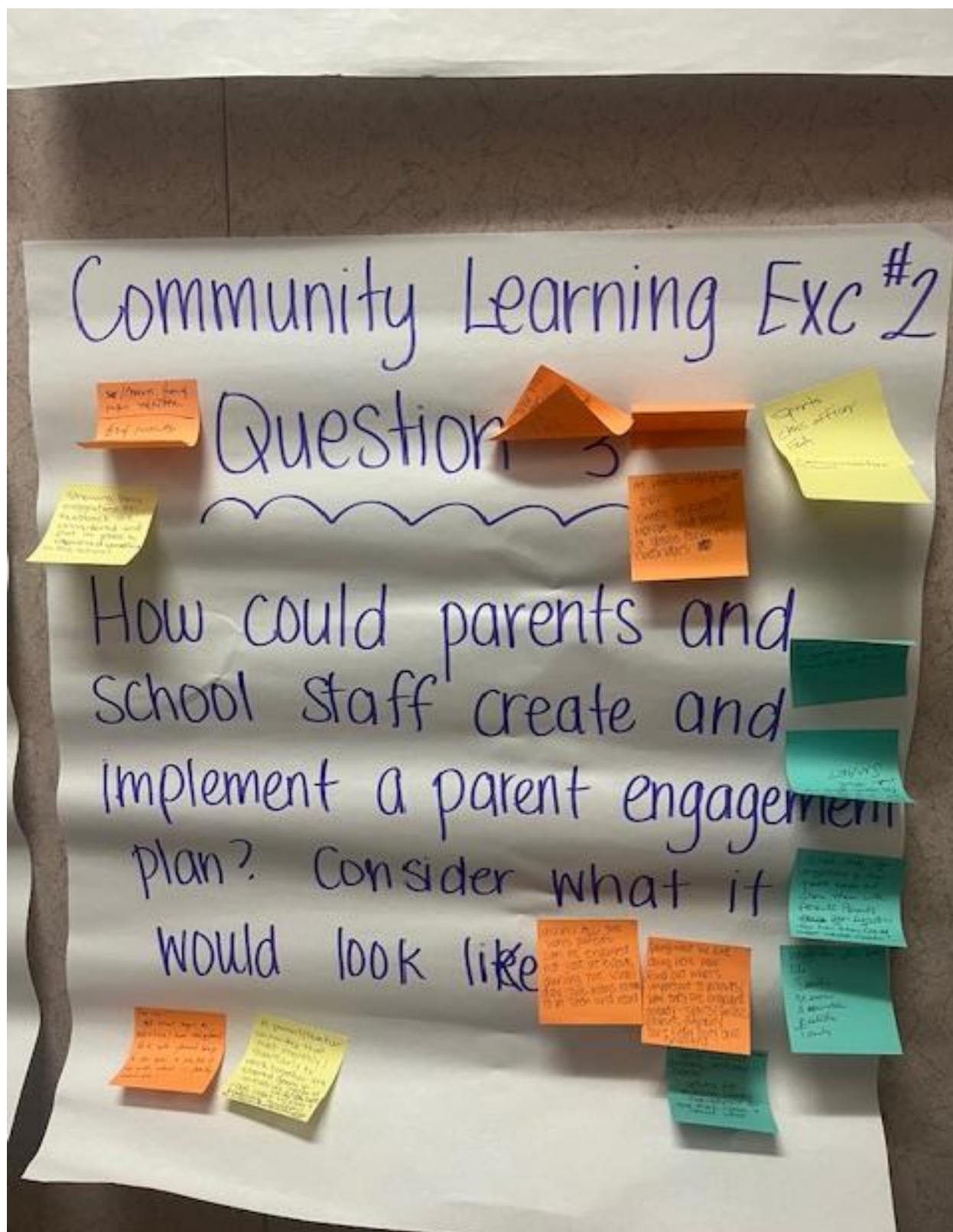


Figure 12: Community Learning Exchange #2 Artifact: Parents' Response to Question #3

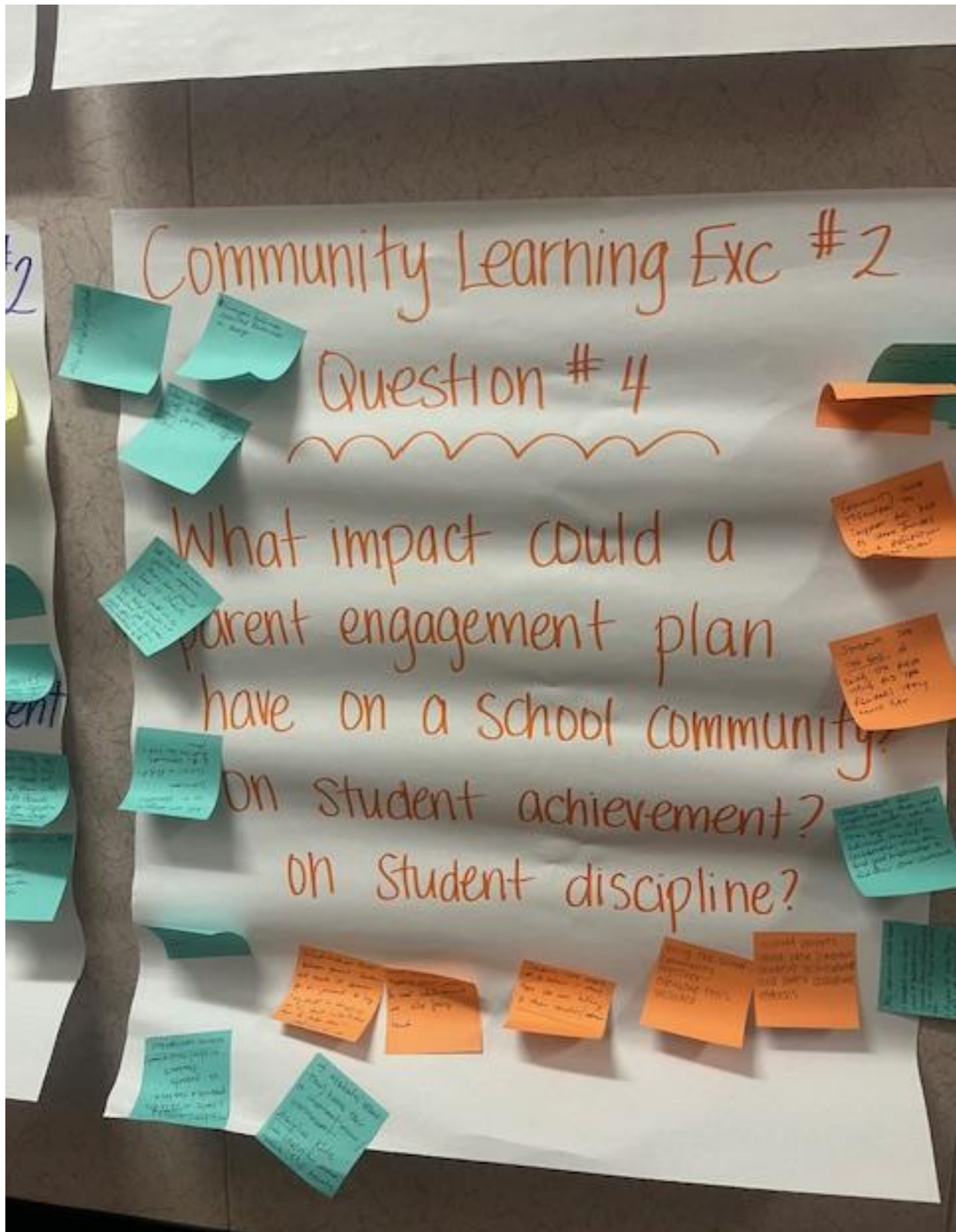


Figure 13: Community Learning Exchange #2 Artifact: Parents' Response to Question #4

perspectives on sticky notes. After sharing their ideas, the notes were affixed to the posters. In addition to the summarized responses from the small groups, the data gathered from these sticky notes were organized to identify the emerging themes presented above.

PAR Cycle 2

Participants in Cycle 2 were presented with data from CLE 1 and CLE 2 to analyze the two groups' perspectives. During this CLE, the co-creation took shape. The teachers and parents were able to interpret the collected data and consider how their new understanding could shape future opportunities for parent engagement. Participants in CLE 3 were tasked with generating ideas and making recommendations to school leaders for future events.

Community Learning Exchange 3: Mixed Group

As CLE 3 began, it was important to frame the participants' thinking about the future tasks around perceived and actual barriers to parent engagement. The purpose of CLE 3 was to reflect on feedback from participants in CLE 1 and CLE 2 and to develop recommendations for school leaders. If the participants in CLE 3 did not consider the barriers that both teachers and parents face regarding parent engagement, the suggestions would be baseless. In Table 8, I have organized the barriers acknowledged by teachers and parents, considering their respective perspectives and assumptions.

Barrier Theme 1: There Is Never Enough Time. When teachers were asked to reflect on the barriers they faced regarding parent engagement in their own schools, they noted concerns about time and schedules. It was said that the school day provides few opportunities for teachers to engage with parents. They recognized that when they are “working, parents generally are as well, causing a conflict of availability for both. After school hours, several teachers reported challenges balancing their personal responsibilities with their children’s schedules to meet at the

Table 8

Barriers of Parent Engagement

School/Teacher Barriers to Parent Engagement	Home/Parent Barriers to Parent Engagement
Time, during/after school day	My own child not sharing information
Inaccessible parents (missing/changing contact information)	Lack of direction communication
Communication is one-sided	Busy home/family schedules
Schedule conflicts with personal life	Lacking “facetime” with teachers
Size of school, population	Too many different forms/platforms
Physical location of school vs. work/town	Embarrassed they “can’t” help
Not knowing the parents	Poor relationship/experience with school
Diverse needs; Prioritizing programming	Technology/accessibility needs

assumed “convenient” time for parents. This conflict led many teachers and parents not connect at all. The parents present noted that their children were being involved in a variety of after-school activities that required them to return to campus in the evening for events was nearly impossible. Additionally, for households that had working parents, specifically single-parent working homes, parent engagement also seemed unrealistic. Parents cited “busy schedules” as a barrier to engagement, as their time is demanded in multiple places.

Barrier Theme 2: Communication Can Be a Challenge. Teachers also expressed frustration with inaccessible parents, noting that too frequently parents are not updating schools with their current contact information. There was extensive discussion of the different forms of communication, teachers' use of various applications, and varying schedules and frequencies of communication, which present a challenge for parents to manage. Parents of more than one child, who were already using different apps for clubs or sports teams, noted that keeping up with all the other platforms was frustrating and overwhelming. One parent reported that she believes the school communicates effectively, yet the disconnect is her own child, who neglects to share information at home. Both teachers and parents noted communication as a significant barrier.

Barrier Theme 3: Size Matters. Another conversation concerned the size of the school and its impact on parent engagement. This teacher used the example of working in a smaller school, where her roster caseload was only 80 students, in contrast to her current caseload of 130 students. The difference in the number of students she is responsible for significantly affects her ability to communicate efficiently with so many more parents. A parent noted that the size of our school is overwhelming during events such as Open House, concerts, and athletic competitions, compared with smaller community schools. Another parent agreed that engagement or

attendance at those events can be affected by the sheer number of participants, given parking, seating, and opportunities.

Barrier Theme 4: Past Experiences Impact Future Relationships. Although only briefly discussed, both parents and teachers strongly believed that prior poor relationships or school experiences, as either a student or a parent, affect parent engagement and serve as barriers to connecting. A parent shared her experience as a student, specifically in middle school, and how it has had a negative and lasting impact on her perceptions of school and teachers. On the contrary, a teacher shared their experience working with a particular family at another school and then being assigned to teach a sibling at our school. She felt like no matter how much she tried, the parent would not engage with her. These examples highlight the importance of acknowledging past experiences to create positive future experiences.

It was essential to keep these barriers in mind as the groups collaborated to make suggestions for school leaders, with an understanding of the audience and their needs. Therefore, when suggestions are created, they should be mindful of barriers that prevent both school and home from engaging. It was also insightful for both groups to hear from one another's perspective.

Community Learning Exchange 3: Suggestions

For CLE 3, parents and teachers were asked to work in mixed groups of teachers and parents. I provided the groups with a summary of the themes from CLE 1 and CLE 2 for their review. This would give the groups a clear understanding of the teacher and parent perspectives as they responded to the questions. They were asked to consider each question and the feedback, and then collaborate to provide suggestions for school leaders. To collect their ideas, the participants were asked to write on poster paper. This allowed the next group to see the first

group's suggestions. They could add to or expand on that idea. In Table 9, the information is organized and condensed from the groups' artifacts (Figures 14-17).

The mixed group of participants offered suggestions for school leaders to consider that were both actionable and concrete, when making final decisions regarding a parent engagement plan. Through discussions, meaningful engagement was defined as intentional, accessible, and relationship-centered, rather than reactive or solely focused on academics by the participants. The most common recurring theme was the need for a consistent school-wide communication system. Specifically, participants stated the communication system should be one that streamlines messaging accessibility and reduces the reliance on students as messengers. Participants suggested that communication should be clear, accessible, and available in multiple languages, across various platforms, to ensure that all families feel informed and included.

In addition to communication, participants highlighted the importance of face-to-face interactions as a foundational element of meaningful engagement. Suggestions included offering conferences for all students, regardless of academic performance or behavioral concerns. Another important point was providing flexible scheduling options to accommodate families' varied availability. Participants stressed that when parents and educators feel heard, valued, and respected, trust is strengthened, contributing to a more collaborative school culture.

It was important to the mixed group participants that the school expanded opportunities for parent engagement beyond curriculum-focused events. There was strong support for family-

Table 9

Suggestions for School Leaders in Response to CLE 1-2 Themes

What does meaningful engagement look like to you? Suggestions for school leaders.

Face-to-face conferences available for all students, regardless of academic abilities or behavioral concerns

Streamline communication to eliminate the student as a vehicle

School-wide communication tool

Change/alter the format of Open House

How does a school community contribute to meaningful engagement? Suggestions for school leaders.

Both parties should feel valued and heard

Weekly communication should be accessible to those whose first language is not English

Create flexible timing for school events, conferences, meetings

Foster culture for mutual respect and trust

How could parents and school staff create and implement a parent engagement plan? Suggestions for school leaders.

Common school-wide messaging app/system

Family orientated events versus curriculum only events

PTA and school could collaborate for parent events

Create workshops for parents for apps or other programs that support their engagement and supporting student learning

What impact could a parent engagement plan have on a school community? Suggestions for school leaders.

Free, family-orientated events that include the community

Events with little-no curriculum talk, to encourage/promote parent-teacher relationship

Pizza bingo, movie nights, holiday/culture orientated events

Collaborate/communicate with feeder schools to avoid duplicate activities/themes OR collaborate to extend activities/themes

Question #1

Suggestions for School Leadership

- Face to Face Conferences for all students regardless of academic abilities or behavioral concerns
- School wide communication is consistent & purposeful
- Standardize communication platform - everyone uses the same thing.

Figure 14: Community Learning Exchange #3 Suggestions for School Leadership (1)

Question #2

Suggestions for School leaders

- * Weekly communication
call/e-mail in Spanish
- * Flexible timing for school events
- * Text message — Weekly (school wide)
— ~~Certain~~ Clubs/Athletics
— BUS

Figure 15: Community Learning Exchange #3 Artifact: Suggestions for School Leaders (2)

Question #3

Suggestions for School leaders

1. Common School/wide messaging App

2. More family oriented events

3. How to use systems/
New way of learning } Parent
HW help

4. PTO/School Collabs

Workshops:

How does it work? Major Clarity
How is it connected? Pathful
Desmos
Canvas
AI responsibility
Tutor.com
Google Suite
... and MORE!

Figure 16: Community Learning Exchange #3 Artifact: Suggestions for School Leaders (3)

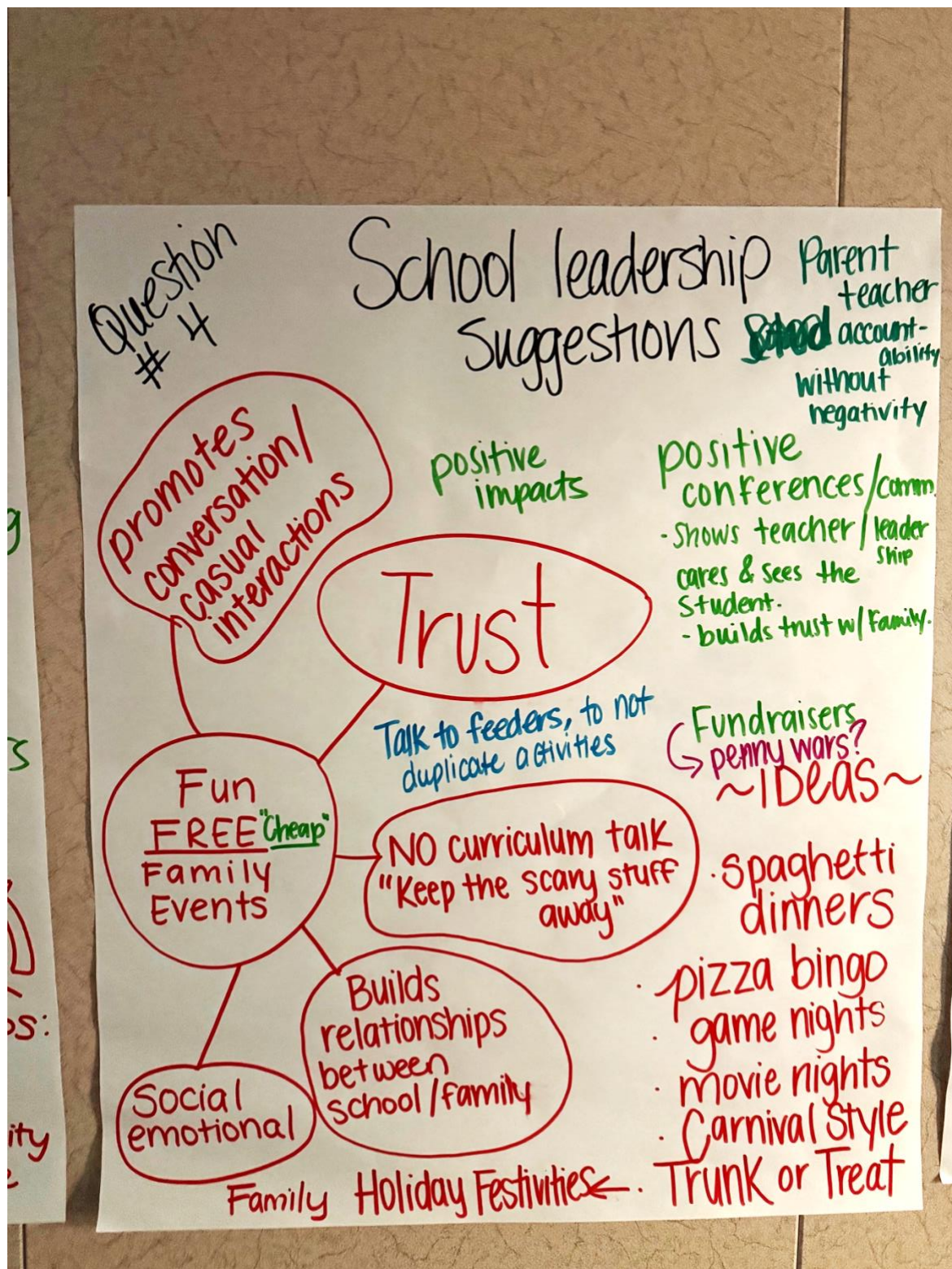


Figure 17: Community Learning Exchange #3 Artifact: Suggestions for School Leaders (3)

oriented, community-building activities that create low-pressure spaces for parents and teachers to interact and build relationships. Some examples suggested were pizza bingo, movie nights, and holiday- or culture-focused events were frequently mentioned, with participants noting that such events, with little to no academic agenda, foster connection and belonging. These “fun” and informal experiences were viewed as particularly important for establishing relationships early in the school year, making more difficult conversations later more productive and less confrontational.

Participants further emphasized the role of collaboration in implementing a sustainable parent engagement plan. Suggestions included closer partnerships between the school and the PTA to co-plan events and workshops, as well as increased communication with feeder schools to avoid duplication and extend engagement opportunities across grade levels. Teachers also recommended workshops to equip parents with the knowledge and tools needed to support student learning at home, including guidance on school-based apps and systems for tracking academic progress. The mixed group participants’ suggestions reflected a shared belief that a co-created parent engagement plan could ultimately open communication, strengthen relationships by creating trust, and foster a more inclusive, collaborative school community. By prioritizing consistent communication, relationships, and creating a collaborative culture, school leaders will be able to create engagement practices that are both meaningful and sustainable.

Taken together, the findings from this mixed-group CLE directly address Research Questions 1 and 2 by illustrating that parents seek intentional, accessible, and relationship-centered engagement practices—characterized by consistent communication, inclusive face-to-face interactions, and collaborative opportunities—which, when co-developed with educators, form the foundation for increasing meaningful parent involvement in the middle school context.

PAR Cycle 3

PAR Cycle 3 of the inquiry followed two parent engagement events, developed with input and suggestions from CLE 3. In Cycle 3, CLE 4 concluded the investigation by reflecting on and considering future events. The final activity of CLE 4 generated information that allowed me to answer the third inquiry question: *“How has co-creating a model for parent involvement impacted me as a school leader?”*

Community Learning Exchange 4: Reflection

I met with the inquiry partners to review all collected data, particularly the participants' suggestions. As a result, two events were planned for the late summer and early fall of 2025: the Parent Boot Camp (APPENDIX L) and the Curriculum, Community, Conference Carnival (APPENDIX M). The Parent Boot Camp was scheduled in conjunction with the 6th-grade orientation for incoming 6th graders. The topics for this event were pulled directly from the feedback collected during CLE 3. Specifically, how-to lessons on carpooling, how to read a student schedule, and how to prepare students for middle school. After the school year began, the inquiry partners and I collected additional data and identified suggestions most appropriate for a mid-semester event. The feedback that seemed most relevant was “family-friendly”, “community”, and “workshops. As a result, an event that encompassed all three was created. At the conclusion of the two events, I invited teachers who had participated in either CLE 1 or CLE 3, and/or in one or both of the parent events, to a reflective CLE.

The entire focus of CLE 4 was on what went well in the two events and what should be reconsidered or modified for future or similar events. Because this was a reflective conversation, I recorded participants' responses on two separate posters, one for each event. The plus/delta reflections are listed in Table 10. As part of the CLE, I recorded responses on a poster as an

Table 10

Plus/Delta Reflections for Parent Bootcamp and Curriculum, Community, Conference Carnival

Reflections for Parent Boot Camp

Plus	Delta
Just the right amount of time, not too long – not too short.	Information about athletics was omitted
Important topics to get the year started were covered: pick-up/drop-off, lunch, supply list and schedules	Offer to ALL new families to the school, not just 6 th grade
Parents appreciated meeting the admin team	Consider a virtual experience for working parents

Reflections for Curriculum, Community, Conference Carnival

Plus	Delta
A lot of community participation, over 20 booths	Attendance was low, but there was a community schedule conflict
Though attendance was low, it was also triple the attendance of the events in the past	Logistics were unclear for entering/exiting
The décor was fun and festive	Consider meal options such as food trucks
Flexible scheduling was appreciated	Curriculum presentations were poorly attended; consider other options

artifact (Figures 18-19).

Praise for Parent Boot Camp. Teachers noted that the duration was just right at 50 minutes and covered the highlights of starting the school year. They agreed that with the administrators leading the conversation, it was a good way for parents to put “names with faces” of the school leadership team. In a school the size of Happy Middle School, drop-off and pick-up can be overwhelming. The participants agreed that the maps displayed and the time discussing them were helpful for parents. They also noted that the information was presented in a “light-hearted” manner, but suggested that the school is intentionally creating “a partnership with families.”

Opportunities for Improvement for Parent Boot Camp. When considering ways to improve this event, teachers relied on informal interactions with parents immediately following the event or on their reflections on the start of the school year with students. One participant noted that the unintentional omission of information about athletics, try-outs, and the required steps before attending try-outs would have been helpful. For new middle school parents, the additional steps required to secure recreational opportunities can leave them scrambling at the last minute. As noted in an earlier CLE, a participant raised the possibility of allowing parents to interact with one another. This was followed up with a discussion on the need for parents not only to feel a connection to their student’s teacher and school, but also to the parent community. Another participant emphasized the importance of discussing typical and atypical behaviors with peer groups. Another topic the participants raised was how the end-of-course (EOG) exams are administered in the middle school. One participant mentioned that within the Happy Middle School community, 6th grade is a transition year from private school to public school, leaving

Parent Boot Camp



Just the right amount
of time, not too long
or short (50 min)

Covered pick-up/drop-off
with maps

Gave the impression the
school wants to partner

Lots of good info to
get started... follow up
at curriculum night

Appreciated meeting the
admin team



Present information
about athletics

Consider opportunities
where parents can
interact

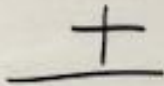
more information about
EOGs, encores

Offer a virtual option
for working parents

Consider this opportunity
at open house... HMS lol
for all new families

Figure 18: Community Learning Exchange #4 Artifact: Parent Boot Camp Reflections

Curriculum, Community: Conference CARNIVAL Reflection



- Lots of community participation (20+ booths)

- Attendance was TRIPLE the previous years' curr. nights

- Feedback from families was positive

- Flow of comm. booths allowed good opportunities to talk

- Variety of comm. orgs.

- Well organized + Communitated

- "Festive" decor

- Flexible schedule was appreciated



- Attendance was low, Schedule conflict with large comm. event

- The curriculum presentations were poorly attended, sched time was a factor

- Consider offering food trucks or pizza/dinner options

- Unclear to enter @ front or rear

- Teachers didn't have full Conf. Schedules, creating down/wasted time

Figure 19: Community Learning Exchange #4 Artifact: Curriculum Community & Conference Carnival Reflections

many parents unfamiliar with the logistics and scheduling of EOGs. Furthermore, many private schools in the greater community conclude their school year before Memorial Day, whereas EOGs are administered afterward. Another effective solution proposed during the reflection discussion was to offer a virtual option for parents who cannot attend in person but could benefit from the information being delivered. The participants discussed various ways a virtual option could be implemented, such as a live-streamed synchronous experience mirroring the morning and afternoon sessions, as well as a recorded asynchronous experience that parents could engage with at a time and place convenient for them. This point of discussion leads to the question of how all new families to the school community could benefit from the experience, thereby expanding the initiation to all new families. A participant also suggested changing the name from Parent Boot Camp to something more reflective of an orientation-style experience.

Praise for the Curriculum, Community, and Conference Carnival. The group was also tasked with considering the Curriculum, Community, and Conference Carnival. They were asked to consider positive points, what they would hope to see repeated, and opportunities for improvement. Participants used their own reflections and informal feedback from peers and parents to generate points for the poster they created. These points were shared and generated further discussion through the participants' diverse perspectives.

The participants agreed that a positive aspect of the event was the number of community stakeholders available to meet with families. One participant noted that there was a booth for every family, including Early College High School representatives, community health organizations, local athletic leagues, and clubs. It was noted that the spectrum of organizations available to parents reflects our respect for and promotion of learning and growth in the whole child.

Opportunity for Improvement in the Curriculum, Community, and Conference

Carnival. Teachers discussed the challenge posed by a significant community event that would draw a massive crowd as a competitor for this experience; however, attendance for this updated curriculum night was still triple that of the previous year. The broad, family-oriented experiences available likely drew a larger crowd. The flexible, open schedule also allowed parents to come at their convenience, which was appreciated. For most events at Happy Middle School, parents enter through the front door; however, because the community portion of the event occurs mainly in the gym, which is located at the rear of the building, parents were unsure where to park and how to enter the building. This is an area of opportunity for future whole-school events to ensure clarity regarding where to park, enter, and exit the building.

Participants suggested that a positive addition to a similar event would be the availability of “dinner options,” such as food trucks or pickup meals that can be ordered or preordered. A participant even noted that this could be a draw for families trying to balance attendance with feeding their families. Overall, participants felt that the carnival event was a success and, in the future, should consider the community calendar, logistics for entering and exiting, and adding dinner options. It was essential for the participants to maintain the event's emphasis on connecting with parents in a low-risk, low-stress manner and to ensure that parents are exposed to community organizations that can help their students grow and thrive. A T-chart with these reflections for both events was created as an artifact at the conclusion of CLE 4.

Reflections of Co-Creating Parent Engagement Opportunities. Another essential part of this CLE was reflecting on the act of co-creating parent engagement opportunities (Figure 20-21), not just the events. The co-creation approach sought to move beyond the notion that schools are the sole voice in creating opportunities for parent engagement. Figures 20 and 21 show the

Reflections of Staff

Co-Creating Parent Engagement Opportunities

CE #4

Positives

- + Parent buy-in starts by getting their input
- + Ideas we didn't think about were brought up + considered
- + Relational trust built by those who participated
- + Overall a positive experience, community building (even for staff)

Negatives

- Difficult to fully explain / understand perspectives (some)
- We didn't get to hear from some parts of our community
- Some barriers we cannot overcome (time, transportation, other responsibilities)
- Only 2 events were planned.

Figure 20: Community Learning Exchange #4 Artifact: Reflections of Staff Co-Creating Parent Engagement Opportunities (1)

Positives

+ Opportunity to reflect as a teacher
"am I engaging families..."

+ Teacher buy-in also begins with their input + the "Why?"

+ Felt good to hear that parents want to engage, somewhat to help teacher + students

+ Reminder that we do have families who want to engage/partner, just need the avenue

+ When we get input, we get engagement!

Negatives/Growth

- District demands do not always align to community needs. This makes the balance of the two difficult

Figure 21: Community Learning Exchange #4 Artifact: Reflections of Staff Co-Creating Parent Engagement Opportunities (2)

t-chart that was made at the conclusion of CLE 4. Teachers considered the positives of collaborating with parents and the challenges they faced.

When considering the positive effects and why they might participate in a co-creation opportunity in the future, one teacher noted that the ideas suggested were ones they had not previously considered. She further explained that, as a teacher with 25 years of experience, it is easy to remain with systems that have worked in the past, but she recognized that, in some cases, participation has decreased. She shared that she had assumed it was due to changing demands on families, but now believes the events are not meeting families' needs as they once did. Another teacher said it allowed them to reflect, "Am I engaging families with my current methods?" Similar to the other teacher, this teacher was able to reflect on her current practice.

Several teachers mentioned the opportunity to build relationships and establish trust with parents in a collaborative, non-threatening context. When considering relational trust, it often begins with reputation; establishing a positive, trusting environment in which parents and teachers collaborate is critical. It was noted that teachers appreciated hearing that parents want to engage, and some expanded, saying they wished to take something off the teachers' plates. Teachers were reminded, from their interactions in CLE 3, that parents want to be engaged but do not always know how best to do so, or may lack awareness of how to become involved. The one point that seemed to shift the mindset of the participating teachers was: "If we get input, we get engagement."

Teachers were also asked to consider the challenges of co-creating parent engagement opportunities with parents. The group discussed at length the idea that, in the early phase of collaboration, it was still somewhat challenging for parents to understand teachers' perspectives or the gravity of their responsibilities, which may affect their engagement with parents. One

teacher mentioned having 160 students on her roster; therefore, her engagement with parents would look very different from that of a teacher who has fewer than 30. On the other hand, a teacher who disclosed that she was unmarried and did not have children felt at a disadvantage when discussing ways to help with homework with a parent, as she had never had to balance the demands of being a working parent, preparing meals, and carpooling to after-school activities. A few teachers noted the disadvantage the CLE 3 faced when making suggestions for school leaders, as various subgroups were not part of the conversation. Not all minority groups were represented, nor were some subgroups that have historically been marginalized in decision-making. It was noted that, unfortunately, there are obstacles that cannot be overcome, such as time constraints, transportation, and the demands of home and work responsibilities. However, understanding those barriers, modifications can be made to minimize the impact. As a participant and scribe, I also faced the challenge of district requirements that do not always align with a school community's needs, particularly regarding scheduling and topics. Overall, the teachers reported that the opportunity to co-create and collaborate was a positive experience, and all teachers polled indicated they would gladly participate in future opportunities.

Inquiry Question 1

The first research question for this study was: *What do parents need and want regarding parent engagement to increase parent involvement in middle school?* In CLE 1 and CLE 2, the first question asked participants: *What does meaningful engagement look like to you?* The main themes that emerged were consistent communication, early and intentional engagement through structured opportunities, collaboration and shared responsibility, transparent communication and active participation and contribution.

Both sets of data highlight the need for clear, frequent, and accessible communication so parents can stay informed and feel included, so they may actively engage in their student's school life. Engagement relies on structured, ongoing communication across multiple platforms digital and print, to reach all families. Parents are most effective when they can get involved early, provided with clarity about expectations, and given structured opportunities for engagement. Timing and structure matter; engaging early by balancing frequency and types of events will maximize parent buy-in and engagement.

Both datasets also indicate that meaningful engagement must be interactive, allowing both teachers and parents to contribute ideas. Parents want to work together to support students, rather than just attending events. Engagement is active and collaborative, with opportunities for parents to contribute according to their strengths, and the school values their partnership and input.

The second question that participants were asked to answer in CLE 1 and CLE 2 was: How does a school community contribute to meaningful engagement? The themes that emerged were similar to the first question: communication and transparency, active participation and contribution, and trust and community building.

Both sets of data emphasize clear, consistent two-way communication as the foundation of parent engagement and the importance of positive communication. Parents and teachers both noted that communication is necessary for parents to feel included in the process and its success. Further, both groups recognized that engagement is not passive and that parents contribute by helping students at home, supporting teachers, and participating in school initiatives or committees. Engagement is action-oriented and collaborative because parents can contribute their skills to support the school's programming. It became evident that when parents feel

included, as if they are part of the shared mission, and valued and respected, their engagement is deeper and more meaningful. Parents want a sense of belonging, and teachers believe respect must be mutual and the responsibility for the student's success must be shared. When combined, these will create a positive school culture.

Inquiry Question 2

The second inquiry question for this study was *How do parents and school staff collaborate to create and implement a parent engagement plan?* In CLE 1 and CLE 2, participants were asked to respond to the following question: *How could parents and school staff create and implement a parent engagement plan? And what impact could a parent engagement plan have on a school community?* The themes that emerged for how parents and schools could create and implement a plan were: intentional, structured and flexible planning, multi-channel and accessible communication, increased student achievement, stronger relationships and community connections and improved discipline and shared accountability.

The mixed groups agreed that parental and teacher availability are barriers that must be considered when planning events. Both agreed that setting 2-3 goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely will create intentional plans. The co-created goals will drive the most significant engagement within the school community.

It was reemphasized that regular communication must be frequent, explicit, and delivered across multiple channels, including print, in-person, and digital, and must be accessible to viewers who require translation. Collaborative engagement and shared responsibility: The responses emphasized that engagement is interactive and reciprocal, with shared responsibility; participation goes beyond attending events and includes providing feedback and supporting students and parents in implementing initiatives.

When the CLEs were asked about the impact of parent engagement on a school community, the themes that emerged were similar to those in responses to earlier questions. They were: Increased student achievement and engagement; Stronger relationships and community connections, and improved discipline and shared accountability. Both datasets highlight that parent involvement positively influences student learning, by also increasing motivation and effort. When parents are engaged and have built trusting relationships with teachers, students are more likely to behave appropriately. Better grades, better behavior, and higher achievement are believed to result from increased parental engagement.

By creating opportunities for parent engagement, schools will foster trust, inclusion, and collaboration that will spread into the community. When relationships are established, it will be easier for parents to access specific support. Engagement builds community, trust and stronger interpersonal relationships for students, teachers and parents. Parent involvement supports behavioral expectations and accountability within the classroom, school and the greater-community, leading to a safe and consistent school environment that will support learning. Parent engagement reinforces behavioral expectations and shared responsibility.

Inquiry Question 3

The third guiding question for this inquiry was *“How has co-creating a model for parent involvement impacted me as a school leader?”*. Throughout this process, I spent time journaling my experiences and my “ah-ha” moments and adjusting my approach to the next CLE. The themes that emerged were: parents and teacher desire mutually respectful relationship, engagement cannot be limited to on-campus engagement opportunities, and technology is a tool to be used, but learning is necessary.

. Both parents and teachers agree that building a trusting relationship is the basis of student success. Communication between both school and home was a recurring point in nearly every CLE. From the parent's perspective, they want to hear from the school in a frequent, consistent and timely manner. As a school leader, the expectation that I maintain this sort of communication is a powerful way for me to maintain a relationship with parents. However, it is also an important for me to model and communicate that expectation for teachers and staff that I lead. It is also important that structures and systems are created that allow for relationships to be established. Low-threat/low-stress events that welcome parents on campus is one way; Protecting teacher working hours, such as early-release days or teacher workdays that allow teachers time within their work day to contact parents, schedule conferences or give valuable feedback on report cards or assignments.

Parents and teachers both agreed that engagement cannot be limited to on-campus, school-sponsored events. This was another change in thinking for me. When reflecting with participants, one noted that one of the negatives of co-creating a parent engagement event is the difficulty in understanding the opposing perspectives. Parents often struggle to understand the time commitment the role of "teacher" has, beyond the school-day. Therefore, suggestions of events held after school are not well-received by teachers who are already committed to game-duty, grading, lesson-planning, coaching, on top of their own familial responsibilities. As a result, shifting the thinking that parent engagement can start at home with simple strategies. An important and free way to engage is placing value on education. Establishing routines that support that emphasis and holding students accountable for behavior and academics are two ways parents can do so. However, through the CLE discussions, it was evident that parents need support on how to do this. While some parents will innately create routes and systems for

convenience in their home, others will benefit from explicit support and rationale. That need for specific support, supports the idea that teachers do not necessarily understand parents' perspectives. Often, teachers who became teachers did so because they had positive experiences at school or home. However, not all parents have, nor do they all have the experiences of routines to rely on that help students find success. This makes the relationship piece between school and home, specifically with teachers of such great importance. Parents must be willing to trust teachers to try their suggestions. And teachers must be willing to adapt their engagement to meet parents' needs to help both, students and parents find success.

In a world where we have access to so much technology and information, it is almost unbelievable that a parent or not engaged in what is happening in schools. In CLEs 1, 2 and 3, participants mentioned over and over the importance of communication, but through a common application. When the leadership team analyzed the variety of communication applications currently being used, 6 were named. If students were involved in sports and clubs, they could potentially be involved in 5-6 applications. Within 1 of the applications, parents could be contacted up to 4 different ways. As a leader, it would important, especially at the beginning of the year, to establish 1 application that the whole school would use. Additionally, it would be important to set expectations such as what sort of information, the frequency and the medium the application would be used, in addition to school-wide updates. An example would be all teachers and staff using the same application, however also having a running document on the website or social media page for ease of accessing so that previous messages could be retrieved.

This experience reminded me of the importance of parent engagement, establishing two-communication, and relationships between school and home. For this to be successful, school

leaders must create a culture, systems and structure that promote the importance of these three pillars.

Summary

In conclusion, the results from this study can best be summarized by the themes that emerged from the Community Learning Exchanges. This chapter described in detail the implementation of the study and the data collection. Furthermore, how the data was analyzed and the results of the analyzation were described. In depth descriptions of the participants, their demographics and how they were solicited was presented in this chapter. In the next chapter, I will briefly summarize the findings, limitations of the inquiry and implications of the findings for practice. I will also provide recommendations for practice and future studies and provide my professional conclusion.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Problem of Practice this inquiry was designed to address is the significant decline in parent engagement, particularly as students transition from elementary to middle school. By reimagining parent engagement through the collaborative design of involvement opportunities, this inquiry enabled parents to be part of the solution. This inquiry also developed a partnership model for middle school communities seeking to increase parent engagement. Through Community Learning Exchanges, teachers and parents learned about the barriers and challenges that contribute to the decline in engagement from opposing perspectives, as well as the associated rewards of participating in intentional involvement opportunities.

The change intervention for this inquiry is two-fold. The Community Learning Exchanges represented a shift in thinking about how teachers and parents can work together to improve their school community. Through listening, learning, reflection, and collaboration, the participants reimagined what parent engagement could look like in a middle school setting. Rather than teachers telling parents how to be engaged, parents were able to bring their ideas and vulnerabilities to the discussion. Most profoundly, participants were able to move from single perspective conflict to dual perspective conflict. The second part of the change intervention was the co-created parent events. These events were created with parental input and voice, using structures aligned with the teachers' and the school's mission.

The research design for this inquiry was based on the Participatory Action Research (PAR). The data collection vehicle was Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs). The participants completed 1, 2, or 3 CLEs, during which they learned from others, shared their perspectives, and reflected on their new understanding in order to co-create the design of future events. By understanding the barriers to parent engagement, schools and parents co-created

events that met the needs of the school community as a whole. The phases of this inquiry can be summarized as four cycles: PAR Pre-Cycle, PAR Cycle 1, PAR Cycle 2, and PAR Cycle 3.

During the pre-cycle, planning and participant solicitation were conducted, including recruiting the inquiry partners. Cycle 1 focused on data collection: CLE 1 was facilitated for teachers and CLE 2 was facilitated for parents. The heart of this inquiry occurred during Cycle 2, when the mixed-group CLE, which included parents and teachers, reflected on the data collected in CLE 1 and co-created ideas and suggestions for 2 events. Cycle 3, the final cycle, focused on reflection of the CLEs, the events, and the process of including parents in the development of engagement opportunities.

Summary of the Findings

To address the decline in parent engagement in middle schools, this inquiry was designed to reimagine parent involvement through collaboration and co-creation of such events. There were three inquiry questions that drove this inquiry: *“What do parents need and want regarding parent engagement to increase parent involvement in middle school?”*, *“How do parents and school staff collaborate to create and implement a parent engagement plan?”* and, *“How has co-creating a model for parent involvement impacted me as a school leader?”*. Because the data collection vehicle was Community Learning Exchanges, the data collected was participant notes, discourse noted during the CLEs, observations and reflections, which was analyzed and clustered by themes in order to draw final conclusions. The inquiry questions and themes are presented in Table 14 and summarized below. Further in this section, I will compare the teacher participant and parent participant perspectives and then, identify the 3 essential factors necessary to reimagine parent engagement through co-creation.

Table 11

Summary of Findings from Inquiry

Inquiry Question	CLE	Participants	Themes
What do parents need and want regarding parent engagement to increase parent involvement in middle school?	1, 2, 4	CLE 1: Teachers CLE 2: Parents CLE 4: Teachers	• Clear, consistent, and accessible communication • Intentional and structured parent involvement • Collaborative partnerships and shared responsibility
How do parents and school staff collaborate to create and implement a parent engagement plan?	1, 2, 3, 4	CLE 1: Teachers CLE 2: Parents CLE 3: Mixed Group CLE 4: Teachers	• Create intentional and flexible planning • Clear, consistent, and accessible communication • Coordination and shared responsibility
How has co-creating a model for parent involvement impacted me as a school leader?	4	CLE 4: Teachers	• Relationship-centered engagement and trust • Communication, technology and access • Collaborative culture, leadership and perspective-shifting

Inquiry Question 1

The first inquiry question, "What do parents need and want regarding parent engagement to increase involvement in middle school?" was explored in CLE 1 with teachers, CLE 2 with parents, and again in CLE 4 with teachers. The three main themes emerged in response to this question: clear, consistent, and accessible communication; intentional and structured parent involvement; and collaborative partnerships with shared responsibility.

The findings indicate that clear, consistent, and accessible communication is fundamental to meaningful parent engagement at the middle school level. In both CLE 1 and CLE 2, parents and teachers emphasized the need for frequent, transparent, two-way communication to keep families informed and included in their children's educational experiences. Effective engagement relies on structured, ongoing communication delivered through multiple channels, both digital and print to ensure that all families can access information. The participants agreed that when communication is intentional, consistent and positive, it establishes trust and encourages parents to engage actively in with the student's school.

The data also underscore the significance of intentional, structured parent involvement, particularly when engagement opportunities are introduced early and accompanied by clear expectations. Parents expressed a preference to participate opportunities where timing, expectations and structure are clear and they each had an influence their participation. Offering a balance of opportunities and clearly communicating how and when parents can contribute generates greater buy-in and sustained involvement.

The findings highlight the importance of collaborative partnerships and shared responsibility as essential to meaningful engagement. Both parents and teachers expressed a desire for engagement that goes beyond mere attendance at events, aiming instead for active,

collaborative participation. When schools invite parents to contribute ideas, share their strengths, and engage in decision-making, relationships deepen, and trust is strengthened. This shared ownership fosters a sense of belonging and reinforces the idea that student success is a collective responsibility, ultimately contributing to a positive and inclusive school culture.

Inquiry Question 2

The second inquiry question, "How do parents and school staff collaborate to create and implement a parent engagement plan?" was explored in CLE 1 with teachers, CLE 2 with parents, in CLE 3 with the mixed group and again in CLE 4 with teachers. The three main themes emerged in response to this question: create intentional and flexible planning opportunities, clear and consistent and accessible communication and coordination and shared responsibility.

Parents and school staff emphasized the importance of intentional, structured, and flexible planning when developing a parent engagement plan. Both groups acknowledged the need to consider scheduling barriers, such as the varying availability of teachers and parents. Participants also highlighted the necessity of clear, consistent, and accessible communication for successful parent engagement. Both groups agreed that communication should be frequent and consistent, delivering information through multiple mediums, to including in-person meetings, and digital platforms. It was also important to participants to engage the under-represented populations by providing translation accommodations, whenever possible. By ensuring that messages reach all families will help parents stay informed, promote participation, and ultimately support student learning.

Finally, the CLEs underscored the importance of coordination and shared responsibility in engagement efforts. Effective parent engagement must be interactive and reciprocal. Through

collaboration among teachers and parents. When engagement is intentional and shared between teachers and parents, relationships are strengthened, trust is built within the school-community, and both groups are able to uphold behavioral expectations. This sort of engagement will positively impact student achievement. Both parents and staff recognized that a coordinated approach enhances accountability and fosters a safe, inclusive, and thriving school environment.

Inquiry Question 3

The final inquiry question, "How has co-creating a model for parent involvement impacted me as a school leader?" was explored in CLE 4 with teachers. The three main themes emerged in response to this question: Relationship-centered engagement, communication and technology access and creating a collaborative culture with the leadership team and allowing for perspective-shifting.

The participants emphasized the importance of relationship-centered engagement through a co-creating a model for parent involvement. It became apparent that both parents and teachers seek meaningful connections but, often understanding of how to initiate or maintain them. As a school leader, demonstrating frequent, consistent, and timely communication helps build trust and establish clear expectations for staff as well as parents. By hosting low-pressure, welcoming events and protecting teachers' work time for parent interactions, then creates opportunities for authentic relationships to develop, thereby strengthening the partnership between the school and home.

Through discourse and reflect, communication and accessibility to technology both emerged as essential tools for supporting parent engagement. I learned that teachers and parents alike, benefit from consistent, clear messaging delivered through a unified platform instead of multiple applications from different teachers and grade levels. Leaders can set expectations for

how and when communication occurs, ensuring accessibility for all families. Technology becomes a practical resource only when it is thoughtfully integrated, providing a centralized location for updates, feedback, and guidance that support both parent participation and student success.

Finally, this experience highlighted the need to foster a collaborative culture within the leadership team, in order to encourage perspective-shifting between parents and staff.

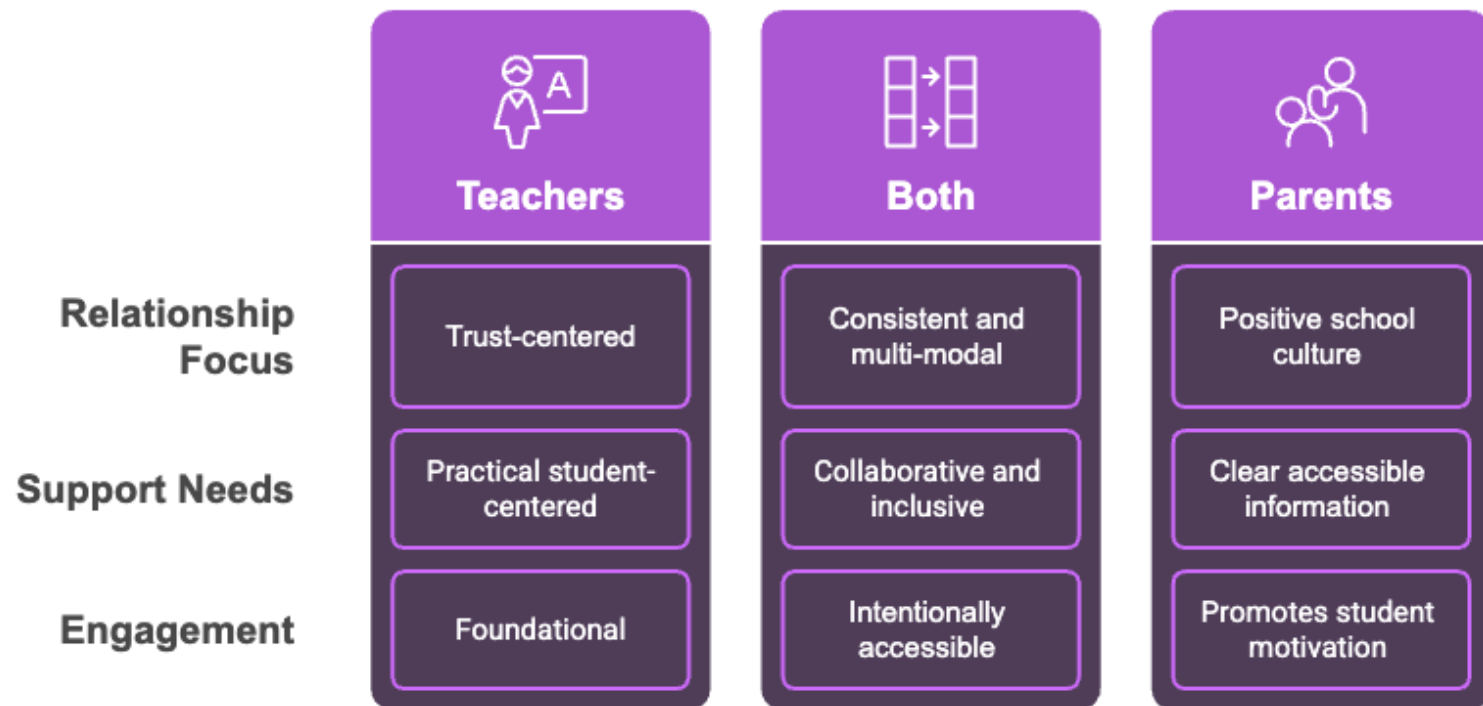
Engagement goes beyond school events to include at-home strategies and a mutual understanding of challenges. Because leaders play such a crucial role in creating these systems, structures, and a school-wide culture that values engagement, it critical that all decisions are made to strengthens relationships, builds trust, and fosters shared responsibility for student growth and success.

Teacher and Parent Comparison of Perspectives

Both parents and teachers emphasized the importance of communication and collaboration to encourage parent engagement. As noted above and presented in Figure 22, parents highlighted the need for open, ongoing, clear, and purposeful communication, noting that such communication builds rapport and provides opportunities for feedback. Similarly, teachers stressed that consistent, accessible, and multi-modal communication is essential, emphasizing that regular updates help parents feel involved in their children's success. Both groups recognized collaboration and partnership as key components; parents viewed them as a means to build community and connection, while teachers focused on shared ownership, trust-building, and co-creating solutions through inclusive partnerships.

However, differences emerged in their focus on engagement practices and outcomes. Parents emphasized the need for intentional, accessible, and inclusive opportunities that

Teacher vs. Parent Perspectives



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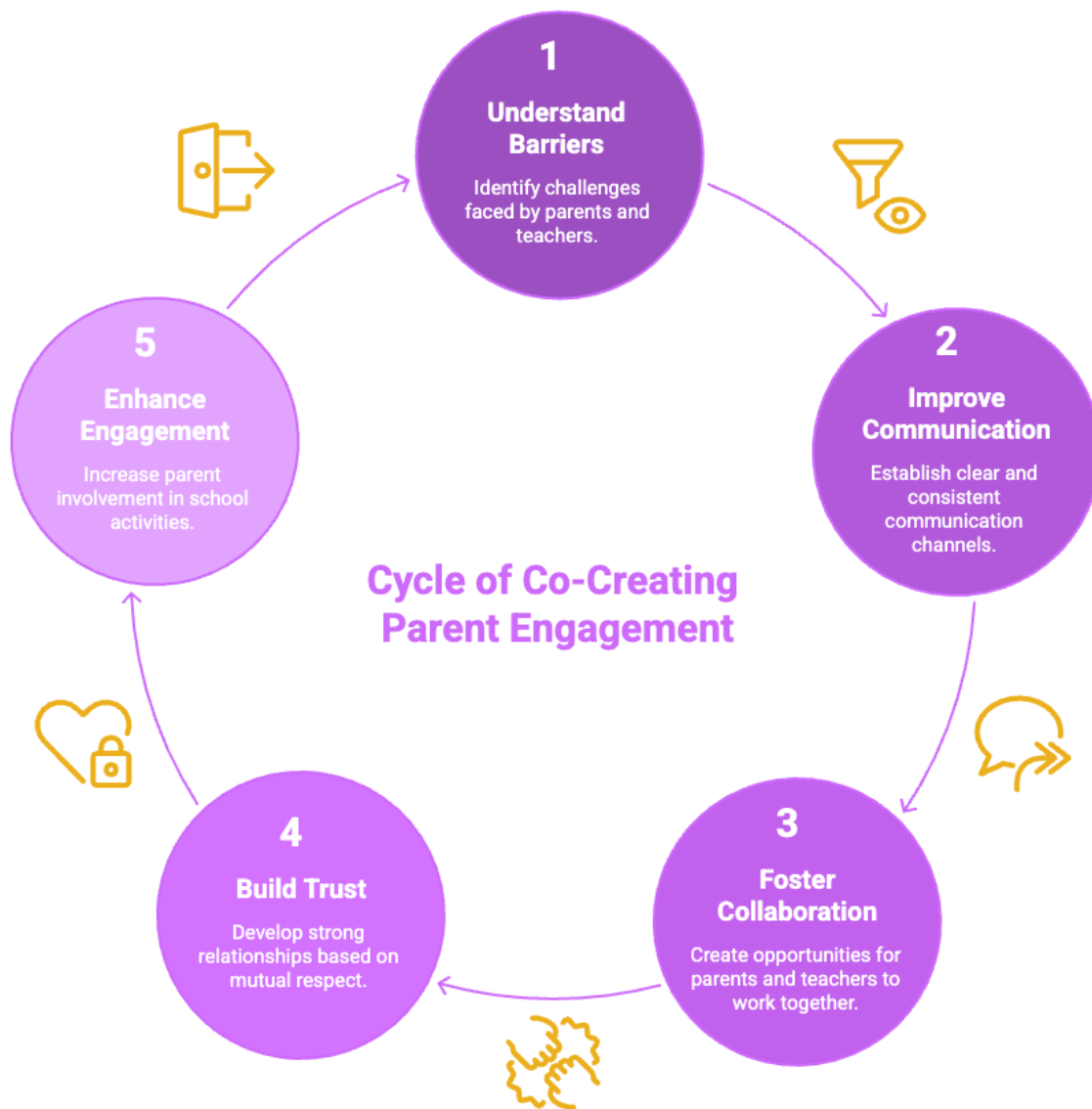
Figure 22: Comparison of Teacher and Parent Perspectives

encourage participation without overwhelming families. In some cases, out-of-schedule demands were cited as a contributing factor to non-engagement. Parents also highlighted the association between involvement and positive student outcomes: increased motivation, self-advocacy, and reduced disciplinary issues. In contrast, teachers focused on practical, student-centered engagement practices, including training on school tools, meaningful events, and strategies to facilitate parent-to-parent and parent-to-school community interactions.

Conclusion

In summary, through this inquiry, the findings indicate co-creating opportunities for parent engagement can increase involvement. I identified three essential factors necessary for successful implementation: understanding barriers, accessible, clear and consistent communication; and structured opportunities for collaboration. These conditions are interdependent and were intentionally developed through the CLEs to build relationships, strengthen trust and create shared understanding. From this learning, the Cycle of Co-Creating Parent Engagement emerged with five distinct parts as presented in Figure 23: Understanding Barriers, Improve Communication, Foster Collaboration, Build Trust, and Enhanced Engagement.

The cycle begins with understanding perspectives and needs, which requires participants to reflect on own experiences while recognizing the barriers faced by others. Structured dialogue creates space for this initial communication, as communication continues through intentionally designed opportunities, collaboration begins to take shape. Over time, consistent communication and collaboration foster trust, grounded in mutual respect and shared understanding; the result is enhanced engagement, reflected in increased and more meaningful parent involvement.



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Figure 23: Intentionally Cultivated Conditions Supporting Co-Created Parent Engagement

Ultimately, this figure represents these conditions and serves as a conceptual model for school leaders seeking to intentionally create the conditions under meaningful parent engagement can occur.

During the third CLE, teachers and parents met together for the first time to review the information collected during the two previous CLEs. The sequencing of the CLEs was intentional: the first two CLEs allowed teachers and parents to reflect within their own groups, establishing norms of respect and openness and creating a safe space for psychological safety before engaging in mixed-group discourse. In preparation for CLE 3, I observed that many responses from previous CLEs reflected a single perspective, demonstrating limited awareness of others' experiences and constraints. Teachers' responses often reflected a narrow focus on the school or classroom's perspective and lacked an understanding of the reasons for parents' reduced involvement. In contrast, the parents' responses also demonstrated a narrow focus, with limited knowledge of teachers' responsibilities beyond the classroom and the number of students they were responsible for.

This led me to believe that mixed-group collaboration would be unproductive without first addressing these gaps in understanding. Therefore, the opening activity of CLE 3 was intentionally designed to promote reflection and perspective shifting. Teachers and parents were first asked to reflect on their perceived barriers to engagement, and then to consider the barriers they believed the opposing group faced. This structured reflection activity established norms for empathetic listening and encouraged participants to move beyond their own positional thinking. It was encouraging that both teachers and parents used shared language, particularly regarding time and communication. Both groups indicated a growing awareness of everyday challenges, rather than placing blame or assigning responsibility to the other.

Time also emerged as a significant barrier for both groups. Teachers identified demanding work schedules and professional and personal responsibilities, including time away from their families, as essential constraints on their engagement. Parents similarly identified time as a barrier. It was noted in particular for families with multiple children. When parents have numerous children in various schools, middle schools compete with the needs of elementary and high schools. Furthermore, parents voiced the competing work and family responsibilities. By intentionally discussing time as a shared constraint through the structured dialogue, the participants began to reframe the engagement challenges as systemic rather than individual. This also created space for collaboration, with inclusivity as the focus. Understanding time as a shared barrier enables decision-makers to plan parent engagement opportunities more intentionally, in ways that are responsive to the lived realities of both teachers and families.

Communication was another barrier frequently cited by both teachers and parents, and it was acknowledged as a challenge from both perspectives. One parent reported that communication intended for her child often resulted in missed or incomplete information. Teachers expressed frustration when they lacked up-to-date information or were unable to connect with parents. Furthermore, participants noted that as the school community has become more diverse, language differences and limited English proficiency have become increasingly prominent barriers. These insights emerged from intentionally structured opportunities for dialogue and reflection, underscoring the importance of accounting for communication barriers in the design of engagement activities.

The second factor essential to successful parent engagement is the need for accessible, clear, and consistent communication. While communication was initially identified as a barrier, the CLEs concluded that it can also serve as a catalyst for change when intentionally planned. It

was determined that when accessible communication is delivered across multiple platforms, including for non-English speakers, on a predictable schedule, it increases parents' ability and willingness to engage. By establishing shared expectations and norms around communication, participants began to envision engagement as more attainable and inclusive. Communication is often the first point of contact between parents and a school community and therefore plays a critical role in building relational trust. Throughout the CLEs, teachers and parents were intentionally provided with structured opportunities to communicate their needs, barriers, ideas, and expectations, with the understanding that their perspectives would be heard and considered. Through this process, parents gained insight into how traditional programming has evolved. In contrast, teachers gained a deeper understanding of how parents wish to engage within the context of an ever-changing society.

The third factor contributing to a successful parent engagement plan is collaboration. The inquiry was intentionally designed to scaffold the cooperation over time, first within teacher groups, then within parent groups, and finally across both groups. This sequencing created space that allowed trust to develop before participants were asked to co-construct solutions. Although the school ultimately makes final decisions based on resources such as staffing and funding, CLE 3 demonstrated the value of engaging parents as collaborative partners in idea development, with a shared focus on student outcomes.

During CLE 3, participants, specifically parents, expressed a desire for more welcoming, family-friendly events focused on the school community rather than on curriculum. They also noted the need for greater awareness of community opportunities for students who are not involved in traditional school sports or scholastic teams. Parents emphasized the continued importance of curriculum nights for staying informed about instructional expectations, but hoped

to see greater balance in future events. Through this collaborative dialogue, the Curriculum, Community, and Conference Carnival was developed. This event intentionally integrated learning sessions with community partnerships learning sessions and opportunities for teacher-parent conferences in an interactive and inclusive format. Attendance at this event was triple that of the previous year's curriculum night, illustrating the impact of intentionally cultivated collaboration.

It was evident that when parents are given structured opportunities to collaborate with teachers in event planning, they can experience the benefits of parent engagement. In summary, increasing parent involvement in middle school requires reimagining engagement opportunities through intentional co-creation with families. For co-creation to be successful, school leaders must intentionally cultivate a shared understanding of barriers, design accessible and consistent communication structures, and scaffold collaborative opportunities that promote reflection, perspective shifting, and trust.

Interpretations of Findings

The findings presented within this inquiry describe how parent engagement can be reimagined within a middle school community through co-creation. The intentional design of structured opportunities for parents to meet with teachers and the resulting collaborative dialogue, identification and mitigation of barriers to parent engagement, and a shared responsibility of improving the school community are all factors that emerged as leverage points to improving parent involvement. While existing literature emphasizes the importance of family-school partnerships (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Decker & Decker, 2003), this inquiry extends that understanding by demonstrating how those partnerships can be strengthened through co-creation. The CLE framework (Guajardo et al. 2016) places parents and teachers as co-learners

by valuing lived experience as legitimate knowledge. By honoring the “wisdom of the people and the power of place,” the inquiry challenged top-down leadership approaches for parent engagement and created space for authentic dialogue.

The CLEs served not only as a data-collection methodology but also as a leadership model. Parents and teachers analyzed barriers, needs, and wants in order to co-create engagement strategies. Data collected using the CLE framework confirmed the axioms that conversations are indeed critical and central pedagogical processes and the people closest to the issues (in this case teachers and parents) are best situated to develop solutions. The Community Learning Exchange strategies were integral to my research design (Guajardo et al., 2016). My research is proof positive that CLEs, among other documented ways to be an invitation-based means of engaging people, can be a research methodology (Tredway et al., 2025). This approach aligns with the National Education Association’s (2008) call to move beyond deficit-based narratives of parent involvement and toward a more collaborative, co-created model.

Wright and Willis (2003) described parental engagement in middle school as minimal or nonexistent, a trend noted in participant responses and reflections collected during the CLEs. Parents described uncertainty about how to engage or be involved as their students entered middle school. Multiple communication apps, increased involvement in clubs and teams competing for to unintentionally exclude parents. Addressing these barriers by moving from traditional school-driven models toward reciprocal, collaborative partnerships that foster intentional conversations demonstrate that declining parent involvement is not inevitable. In this inquiry, creating space for teachers and parents to communicate and collaborate challenged the existing imbalanced perceptions of expectations.

Across all three Community Learning Exchanges, data collected from participant input demonstrates the interconnectedness of Epstein's (2002) six types of parent involvement. During CLE 1, teachers emphasized the need for early, trust-centered engagement and consistent communication, such as predictable school-wide messaging. Suggestions such as to reimagining the Open House structure to align with communication and parenting practices will support shared expectations and build relational trust at the start of the school year. Teachers also emphasized partnerships with local organizations, churches, and businesses, reflecting a shared investment in student success through community collaboration. In CLE 2, parents echoed the importance of open, ongoing communication and identified ways they support learning outside of school, such as reinforcing routines, monitoring academic progress, and asking teachers how they could help—demonstrating *learning at home* and *volunteering*.

Participating in committees and providing feedback, were two ways that parents noted how their input could be used to further aligned with *decision-making*. During CLE 3, when teachers and parents analyzed barriers together and co-created recommendations, all six components of Epstein's model converged. Suggestions such as streamlining communication systems (*communicating*), offering parent workshops on instructional platforms (*learning at home*), expanding family-oriented community events (*collaborating with the community*), and creating intentional opportunities for parents to participate in planning and leadership (*volunteering* and *decision-making*) illustrated how engagement becomes most meaningful when responsibility is shared across home, school, and community. Together, these examples demonstrated that Epstein's framework was not applied as a set of discrete strategies, but rather enacted as an integrated, relational model through the CLE process

Through this inquiry, parents shifted from passive recipients of information to active co-creators and co-contributors, reinforcing Epstein's "decision-making" type of involvement. Ferlazzo's (2011, 2013) framework, distinguishes parent involvement as schools "doing to" families versus parent engagement as "doing with" them, provided the language and philosophical grounding for this inquiry. The collaborative CLE's provided a pathway to further shape the distinction between "involvement" and "engagement". Traditional involvement models emphasize school-driven opportunities, whereas engagement emphasizes co-creation and shared leadership.

These findings validate this distinction, with co-created engagement strategies reflecting a shift away from school-driven practices toward reciprocal partnerships. From the CLEs, it was noted that parents desire these partnerships and decision-making opportunities. Parents are more invested in supporting learning at home when they have a voice in designing systems created to support students.

Limitations of the Inquiry

While most of the research design adhered to the original structure, limitations were encountered during the process. Initially, I had anticipated a broad turnout among teachers. I had planned for the participants' demographics to match the student population as closely as possible. The trouble with that ambitious goal is that the staff at Happy Middle School does not currently match the student demographics, neither by race nor by gender. When the initial group signed up to participate, no minorities were represented. I extended personal invitations to staff who are members of minority groups; however, I did not receive confirmation of attendance until the start time of the CLE. It was important that the minority perspective be considered and represented in the conversations; however, it did not emerge naturally. Recognizing the efforts of the staff at

Happy Middle School helps foster a respectful tone and highlights the context of the limitations they face.

Another limitation I encountered during this inquiry was that fewer participants from the first or second CLE were able to participate in the third CLE, where the collaboration occurred. The participants in the third CLE were tasked with reflecting on the collected data and making recommendations for school leadership teams to consider when planning engagement events. It could have generated richer discussion during CLE 3 if all participants at the table had the background knowledge from either the first or second CLE. For teachers, participation often required time during the teacher workday, after school, or on weekends. Parents reported challenges with involvement during the school day due to work commitments, and during evenings and weekends, they faced familial obligations. This was likely the most significant challenge to participation, as it limited the depth of discussion and the diversity of perspectives.

There was also an unavoidable limitation in the scheduling of the Curriculum, Community, and Conference Carnival that likely affected family attendance. The local university had a home football game, which is highly attended by the Greenville community, scheduled on the same night the school district required schools to host parent-teacher conferences. To make the event most impactful, the Happy Middle School community opted to follow district expectations rather than schedule a separate event. Even still, attendance for this event was nearly triple that of previous curriculum night events, demonstrating the scheduling conflict's impact on family participation.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

The findings of this study suggest that, to achieve an effective parent engagement program, practices must intentionally address barriers to participation, communication between

school and home must be clear, consistent, and accessible, and school leadership must establish and model a culture of collaboration. Because the focus of this inquiry was co-creation, it was guided by the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) methodology, in which teachers and parents are positioned as co-learners rather than as passive recipients of school initiatives (Guajardo et al., 2016). Because CLEs emphasize reciprocity, collective leadership, and the integration of personal narrative as a shared knowledge source, structured dialogue and shared inquiry are enabled. Through intentional relationship-building, participants critically examined current engagement practices and developed solutions that were attainable and sustainable. In this study, the CLEs functioned as both a research methodology and an intervention, enabling the learning community to serve as a change agent.

The most significant implication that emerged through the CLE process was the shift from single-perspective conflict to dual-perspective conflict. During CLE 1 and CLE 2, I observed that the data indicated limited awareness of the other group's perspectives. The teachers' responses often reflected a narrow focus on the school's perspective. They conveyed a lack of understanding of the reasons for parents' reduced involvement or the complex barriers they may face. In contrast, the parents' responses also reflected a narrow focus and a limited understanding of teachers' professional responsibilities beyond direct instruction and of their personal commitments. Using CLE methodology, which prioritizes perspective-taking and relational trust, I conducted an opening activity for CLE 3 that invited teachers and parents to identify barriers to their own engagement and articulate the perceived barriers of the other group. This activity was highly impactful and enabled participants to move from single-perspective conflict resolution to dual-perspective conflict resolution, culminating in shared understanding. This activity supported the development of empathy, mutual respect, and collective problem-

solving, and it represented a practical enactment of dual-perspective conflict resolution that shifted toward shared understanding, which is fundamental to the CLE methodology.

Communication emerged as a central theme across all four CLEs. Both teachers and parents expressed the need for communication that is consistent, transparent, multilingual, and accessible across technological platforms. To address this, the school has already begun creating dual-language announcements, continued its weekly calls and emails, and now uses its social media page for regular notifications. Furthermore, we have assigned a staff member to provide regular, consistent updates to the website, ensuring that parents know when to expect them. These strategies are not only logistical responses to the identified concerns but also linked to the CLE principle of democratizing access to information as a foundation for participation.

Participants also noted the need to consolidate communication applications into a single platform to reduce missed or inequitable access. Consistent with CLE's capacity-building approach, the school plans to offer workshops and tutorials to ensure parents have the skills to use communication and learning platform systems fully. In this way, the school is not merely disseminating information, but actively building the conditions for engagement and accountability.

Another key implication of this inquiry was a shift from school-centered planning toward collaborative design of parent engagement opportunities. Through conversations revealed during the CLEs highlighted that some traditional school events no longer align with the needs of today's families. Through the CLE process, parents' lived experiences became primary sources of understanding, further challenging the assumption that schools already know what families want. Consistent with the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and CLE

methodology, stakeholder input directly informed the redesign of engagement structures, thereby increasing relevance and ownership of both teachers and parents.

However, what truly distinguishes this inquiry from similar types of research, and one of the most significant implications of the inquiry overall, is the intentionality behind the invitation offered to parents to be part of the co-creation. Parents were invited to be co-creators, rather than passive recipients of what the school created and deemed parent engagement. Furthermore, parents were not merely consulted or asked for their opinions; they were deliberately invited to design the events from the start. I recognized the importance of their perspective in designing this inquiry and the need for structured opportunities to capture it. Through the CLEs, parents were allowed to reflect on their lived experiences, listen to and share others', and boldly question the status quo. The CLE allowed their experiences to be recognized as knowledge and expertise distinct from the school's.

The core of the co-creation occurred when teachers and parents sat together at the table. Authentic conversations about barriers occurred, and that shift in perspective began to take shape. As parents spoke, teachers listened. When teachers spoke, parents listened. New shared learning emerged between the two groups, particularly for me. As a result, the participants and I shifted from "doing engagement" to "co-creating engagement. The result was two events that were meaningful, intentional, and responsive to the needs of the school and parent communities. The parents' authentic participation transformed how this school community plans and implements future endeavors.

Recognizing and understanding barriers to participation, such as time constraints, communication and language barriers, and work and personal responsibilities, is essential to parent engagement. The PAR and CLE processes enabled the identification of these barriers

through reflection and dialogue. Implementing accessible, clear, and consistent communication requires planning and is foundational to building relational trust. Once trust is established, collaboration becomes possible, creating conditions for the co-creation of parent engagement initiatives that reflect the community's needs and aspirations. The factors contribute to the shift in mindset toward collective responsibility for improving the school community. Taken together, the implementation of the CLE methodology in this study illustrates that parent engagement is not simply a program to be delivered, but a relational, participatory process rooted in shared leadership, cultural responsiveness, and the experiences of both families and educators.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Study

Based on the outcomes of this inquiry, I would strongly encourage any principal, particularly at the secondary level, to consider the Participatory Action Research (PAR) or Community Learning Exchange (CLE) process for collecting information from their community. The participants found greater value and achieved a more profound understanding when they could hear and share their perspectives openly. Additionally, when parents and teachers are involved in the co-creation of initiatives that support the school, there is immediate buy-in. In this inquiry, parents and teachers reflected on the discovery of new perspectives and ideas and then generated suggestions for school leaders to consider implementing in future parent engagement events. The shift from understanding only their perspective to empathizing with their counter perspective was undoubtedly one of the most impactful outcomes of this inquiry.

Two particular suggestions for someone who would replicate this study are to partner with the parent association or a similar committee already established at the school and to follow a similar timing for the CLEs. Likely, the parent association already comprises a group of parents who wish to be engaged. Their insight into how and why they remain involved and participate in

school-sponsored events will inform planning. However, it is essential to also make space for parents who are not involved in traditional parent organizations; their voices are equally important and should be considered if change is to occur. A few suggestions for increasing the representation of underrepresented voices are offering flexible participation options, targeting recruitment with a focus on relationship-building, planning structured participation events centered on discussion and feedback collection or discourse facilitation, and incentivizing participation. While most schools cannot compensate parents for attending events or for offering their insights, school leaders can schedule events in ways that benefit parents or remove barriers, such as by offering childcare or providing dinner options in exchange for time and resources.

Secondly, I would follow a similar time line for collaboration and idea generating in the spring, into the summer for the next school year. Establishing goals through collaboration in the spring for the following school year will increase the intentionality, allow for resources to be adequately allocated and schedules to be created. Events, whether for gathering perspective and needs, planning or for school-wide parent engagement, should be intentional, purposeful and meaningful for the teachers and the parents. Creating events that do not meet those expectations will cause parents to not find future events worthwhile to attend when schools are already competing for parents' time and attention.

Lastly, school leaders hoping to increase their parent engagement must be willing to listen to their community. Furthermore, they must be willing to be vulnerable enough as leaders to recognize opportunities for improvement, regardless of how successful their school is. They must be willing to listen to and act on the perspectives shared by parents. If school leaders want to have active and engaged parents within their school community, they must be willing to invite

them in, listen to them, and adjust how they serve based on how the community needs to be served.

Scholarly Practitioner Reflections on Leadership

My personal leadership style is closely aligned with the PAR and CLE structure, particularly as it centers on learning through dialogue, reflection, and shared meaning-making. I deeply value what can be learned from one another's experience or perspective when provided the opportunity to practice intentional listening and purposeful questioning. Throughout this inquiry, I learned that meaningful engagement does not occur by chance; rather, it requires the intentional creation of conditions that foster vulnerability, trust, and psychological safety.

Dialogue and making space for it have been part of my leadership style since the early days of my teaching career. When I distributed report cards, I included a "scoring" card for parents and students to provide me with feedback. I would get some participation, but generally more positive responses than critical or constructive criticism. The questions were basic and, looking back, likely only seeking positive feedback. This evolved as I took the principal role in asking my teachers for feedback at the end of the school year. I read *The Speed of Trust* (Covey, 2006) and used his suggestion to ask specific, focused questions. In this case, it was trust. The feedback was profound, and as with any anonymous survey, it was essential to read through all of the information, specifically the outlier comments, and look for the themes that emerged. That first summer, the most common theme was communication, so I spent the summer reading professional literature to improve my communication skills. When the staff returned that fall, I shared the survey results and my actions in response. I also shared with them the three goals I was setting for myself based on their feedback and used them as the basis for my Professional Development Plan. This helped shape the culture in my school community: when feedback is

solicited, it will be used intentionally to drive ongoing improvement in leadership and school operations. This experience facilitating CLEs has taken the survey experience to the next level, specifically by allowing teachers and parents to shift their understanding of barriers from a single perspective to a dual one. So often, when decisions affect the school community, those not directly involved miss the other perspective, and their likelihood for buy-in is low. I recognize the importance of creating opportunities for opposing viewpoints to reflect on lived experiences, listen and share with others, and have their knowledge recognized as expertise. But through listening and sharing, new shared learning can emerge. This is what enables true co-creation and collaboration for self and system improvement. At my core, I believe seeking input from those you serve for understanding how to better serve, is the most important virtue of leadership. The learning and experiences gained through this inquiry just furthered that belief.

The grounding activities I created that opened each CLE were critical to establishing these conditions. The grounding questions were created for participants to find value in their lived experiences and trust their personal perspectives had space at the table. The activity was designed for reflection and understanding rather than problem-solving. These activities fostered a sense of safety, enabling participants to engage more authentically. I was able to experience as a facilitator, where previously being a participant, how the grounding activity could reduce defensiveness, create connections, and foster shared norms of respect and openness. All of which are elements essential to genuine engagement and collaboration.

As I planned the CLEs, I intentionally designed grounding questions with sufficient time to reflect and respond independently before engaging in dialogue. This structure ensured that dominant voices did not unduly influence participants and that participants could share their thoughts with greater confidence. Particularly in the mixed-group CLE, I recognized the

importance in the intention reflection period as a precursor to productive dialogue. This seemed especially important when the participants were asked to engage across different roles and perspective. The goal of these questions was to gently push participants beyond their comfort zones, as authentic collaboration requires a willingness to be vulnerable within a supportive environment.

Through this inquiry, I learned that perspective shifting must be intentionally scaffolded; it cannot be assumed or rushed. It became evident that once they had time to reflect, listen, and feel heard, participants were more willing to engage in collaborative problem-solving. I plan to use this practice to open Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings at the beginning of the year and at the middle of the year mark. This will be especially important as new team members join and relationships are necessary for collaboration. I also anticipate using this strategy for future staff meetings. Rather than beginning with the agendas or outcomes for the meeting, I plan to incorporate grounding questions that encourage reflection, surface multiple perspectives, and establish norms for respectful dialogue.

Ultimately, this inquiry reinforced the idea that leadership is not about directing the conversations or being the sole decision-maker, rather the leader is responsible for cultivating the space that promotes collaboration, allows for shared-learning and values diverse perspectives that lead to creative, shared problem-solving. As these ideas are applied to PLCs, leadership team and staff meetings, as well as other collaborative spaces, the teams I lead will be limitless in the ideas they can generate and the shared-learning they will experience.

Summary

This chapter summarized the findings and presented the interpretations and implications of how reimagining parent engagement through co-creation could address the decline in parent

involvement in middle school, while acknowledging the identified limitations. Furthermore, recommendations for future practice or research, along with reflections on my leadership inquiry, are presented.

Analysis of the data revealed three essential, interdependent factors for increasing parent engagement in middle school contexts: developing a shared understanding of barriers to engagement; establishing accessible, clear, and consistent communication; and providing structured opportunities for collaboration. The sequencing of the CLEs was intentional. It began with questioning and reflection among teachers, and then among parents. Next, it progressed toward mixed-group discourse and co-creation to enhance opportunities for parent engagement. Figure 23 presented these conditions and serves as a conceptual model for school leaders seeking to design systems and structures that support meaningful parent engagement.

The theoretical framework for this inquiry was compared with the outcomes presented in the summary of findings, which suggested that Epstein's work, which identifies the six types of parent involvement, can be implemented through intentional design, sequencing, and co-creation between teachers and parents. The six individual types of involvement were compared to the findings, and examples of consistency and differentiation were identified.

Limitations of the study were presented, which included a lack of rich, diverse voices and fewer participants than anticipated. Suggestions for addressing these in future research were provided. Furthermore, the implications of the findings, the shift from single to dual perspectives, and the transition from school-centered planning to co-creation were presented. This was important to note to highlight the significance of the shared learning that resulted from Community Learning Exchanges facilitated through this inquiry.

The chapter concluded with recommendations for practice and future study, as well as the

scholarly practitioner's reflections on leadership. PAR and CLEs were discussed as prominent vehicles for soliciting participation and promoting the co-creation of parent engagement plans. Suggestions for assembling the teacher and parent groups for co-creation were discussed, and a suggested timeline for practice was highlighted. My most impactful reflections were noted. The leader considering this approach must be sufficiently vulnerable to ask for and receive feedback to improve their community. The importance of the grounding activity in promoting trust, connection, and psychological safety for sharing and receiving insights they may not have considered previously.

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Appendix A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
Willis Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284**
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Jennifer Johnson](#)
CC: [Lawrence Hodgkins](#)
Date: 3/31/2025
Re: [UMCIRB 24-002477](#)
Co-creating a partnership model in middle school

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 3/31/2025. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Chapters 1-3 (0.02)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Demographic Collection Sheet(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Focus Group Questions/Agendas(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Informed Consent(0.01)	Consent Forms
Recruitment Advertisement(0.02)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Recruitment Script (Email)(0.03)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

Appendix B: Inquiry Informed Consent



Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: REIMAGING PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN A SCHOOL COMMUNITY BY CO-CREATING A PARTNERSHIP MODEL FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL

Principal Investigator: Jennifer Johnson

Institution, Department or Division: Department of Educational Leadership, College of Education, East Carolina University

Address: 2995 Mills Road Greenville, NC 27858

Telephone #: 252-355-7071

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to reimagine parent involvement by co-creating parent engagement opportunities with parents in a middle school. You are invited to participate in this research because you are a middle school faculty/staff member or a middle school parent. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By completing this research, we will be able to create a partnership and co-create parent engagement opportunities that benefit students and their school community.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 40 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

There are no known reasons as to why you should not participate.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate. There will be no negative repercussions for choosing not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at Hope Middle School, 2995 Mills Road Greenville, NC 27858, in the media center. Staff will be asked to participate in 1.5 hours community learning exchange; Parents will be asked to participate in a 1.5 hours community learning exchange. Both groups will be invited to return for a 2 2-hour learning exchanges as mixed groups. Total time spent not to exceed 6 hours over 4 days.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do the following:

- What does meaningful engagement look like to you? When responding, consider style, topics, frequency, and medium.
- How does a school contribute to meaningful engagement?
- How could parents and school staff create and implement a parent engagement plan? Consider what it could look like.
- What impact could a parent engagement plan have on the school community? Student achievement?
- All conversations will be recorded by notetaking and kept in a locked storage cabinet. Recordings will remain private and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the dissertation process.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

There are no known risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. The anticipated benefit from taking part in this study is deeper understanding of parent involvement in middle school. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

You will not be compensated for taking part in this research.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

There is no cost for you to take part in this research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- The investigator(s) conducting this study.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

Electronic copies will be saved to a password-protected, secured online OneDrive. Others assisting with the research will not have access to the original names.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?

Participants may cease their involvement in this research at any time. Staff who choose to discontinue their involvement will not have any performance or evaluation consequences.

Parents who choose to discontinue their involvement will also not face any consequences or limited experience as a parent in the school community.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The team conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 252-355-7071 between 8:00 AM and 4:00 PM Monday through Friday.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may contact the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

Is there anything else I should know?

Your identity will be evident to those individuals who see this information. However, I will take precautions to ensure that anyone not authorized to see your identity will not be given that information. Identifiers might be removed from the identifiable private information and, after such removal, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or your Legally Authorized Representative (LAR). However, there still may be a chance that someone could figure out the information is about you.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following, and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)

Appendix C: Community Learning Exchange 1 & 2 Advertisement

COMMUNITY LEARNING EXCHANGE



March 5, 2025 **Staff**
2:30-4:00



May 18 2025 **Parents**
3:00-4:30 PM



Join us for small group, interactive and engaging conversations where participants will share priorities, exchange ideas and gather feedback to shape future parent engagement opportunities for our school

Agenda Items:

- What is parent involvement?
- Communication frequency, style
- Partnerships

RSVP
PARENTS

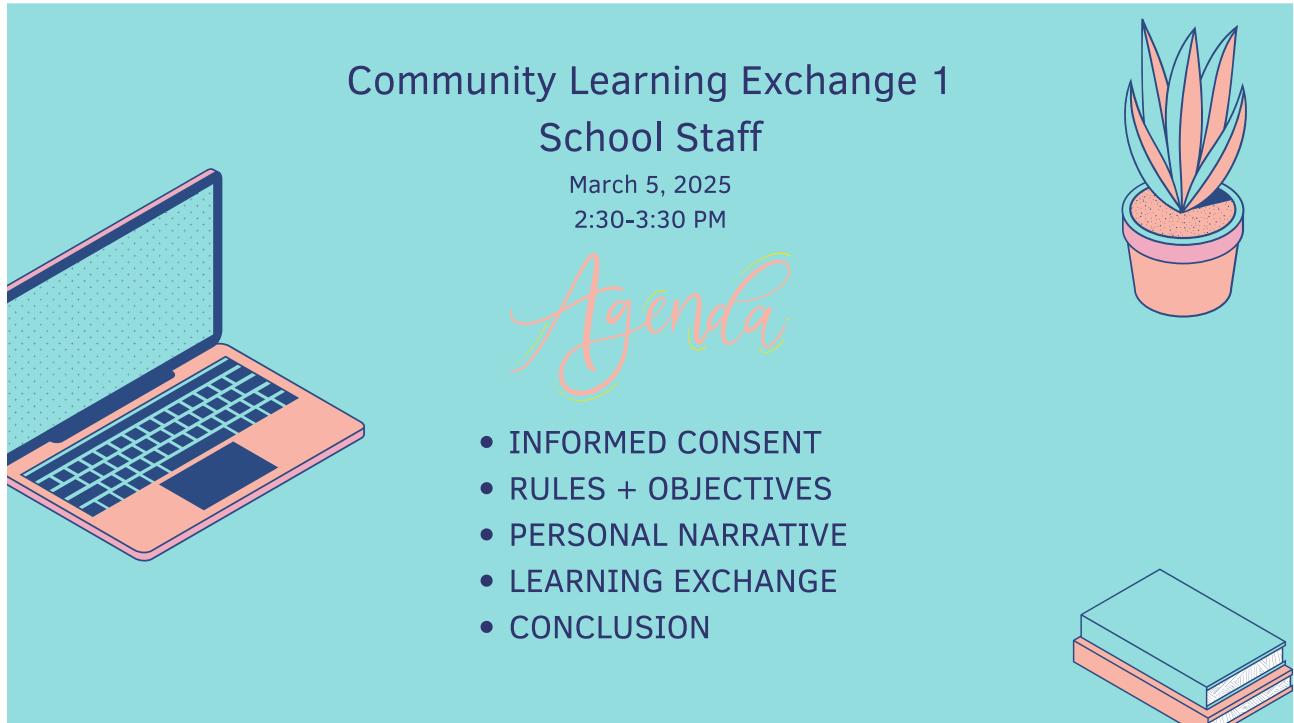
RSVP
STAFF

<https://forms.gle/fUT3o7Q9ncoc2uj99>

Let's reimagine what parent engagement looks like in middle school!

This is a research study to collect information to improve parent engagement in middle school

Appendix D: Community Learning Exchange 1 Agenda



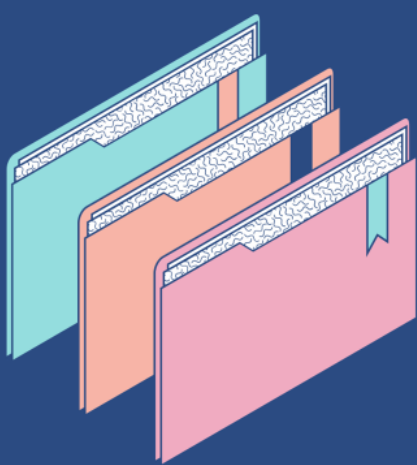
Appendix E: Community Learning Exchange 1 Presentation



COMMUNITY LEARNING EXCHANGE #1

School Staff

REIMAGINING PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN A
SCHOOL COMMUNITY BY CO-CREATING A
PARTNERSHIP MODEL FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL



Agenda

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?

- INFORMED CONSENT
- RULES + OBJECTIVES
- PERSONAL NARRATIVE
- LEARNING EXCHANGE
- CONCLUSION

Tip: Use links to go to a different page inside your presentation.

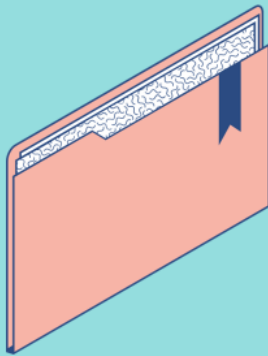
How: Highlight text, click on the link symbol on the toolbar, and select the page in your presentation you want to connect.



Rules + Objectives

- Welcome to G-Vegas! Vegas rules apply, what is said in here - stays in here
- Be open to challenging your thinking and that of those you will exchange ideas with, respectfully
- Contribute to data collection necessary to reimagine parent involvement by co-creating a partnership model in middle school

3



Informed Consent

Please refer to the forms in front of you...in order to participate, you must sign the consent.

Participation is completely voluntary; you may choose at any time to discontinue without risk of consequence.

4

Personal Narrative

WHAT DO YOU BRING INTO THE ROOM OR THE CONVERSATION?



What was your experience like as a middle school student?

Did you like middle school? What were you involved in during those years? Do you have a favorite memory or one you'd rather forget?

What was your path to become a middle school teacher?

Was your path straight to middle school, or did it take turns along the way? What prepared you to be a middle school teacher?

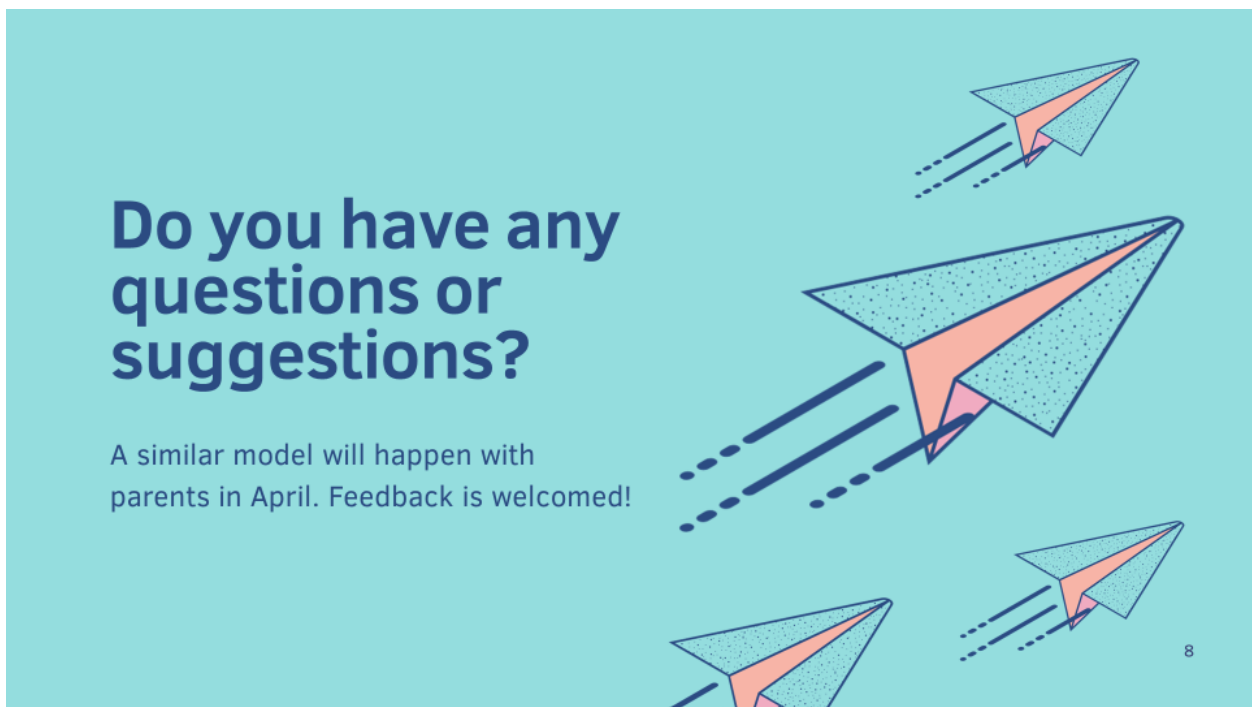
What do you remember about your parents' involvement when you were in middle school?

Were your parents actively involved in your school experience? If not, do you wish they were? How did their involvement impact your success?

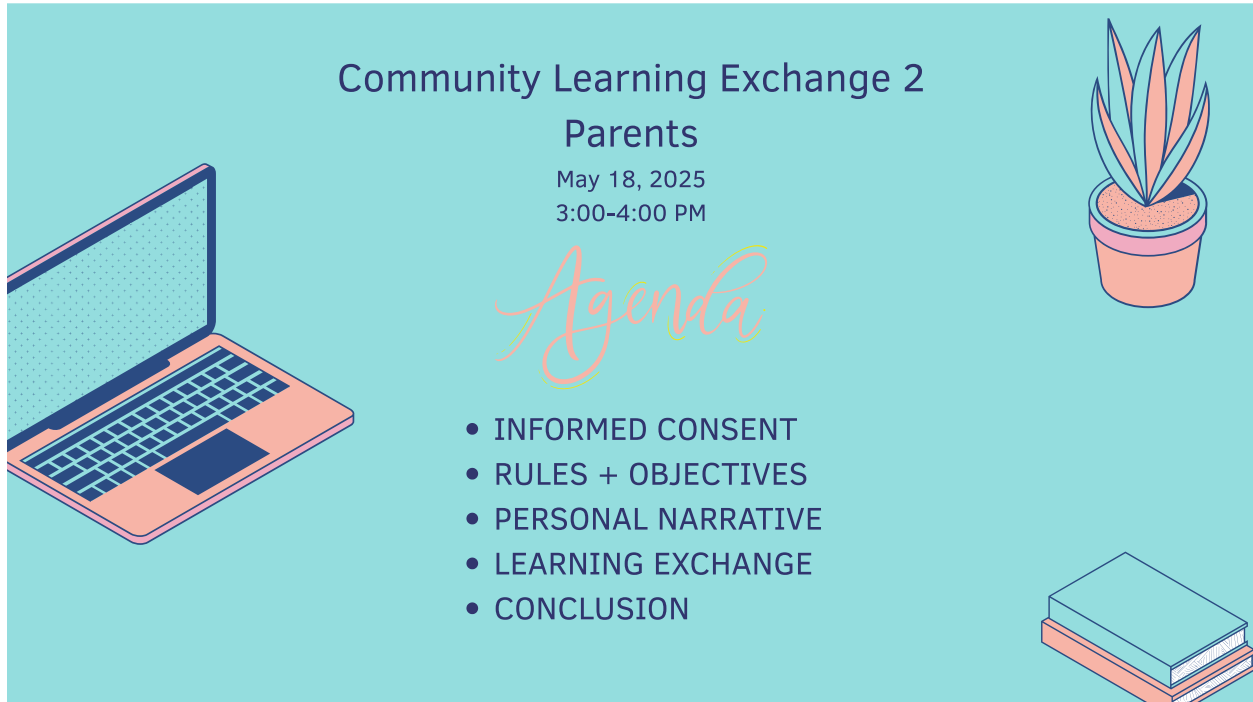
Community Learning Exchange



6



Appendix F: Community Learning Exchange 2 Agenda



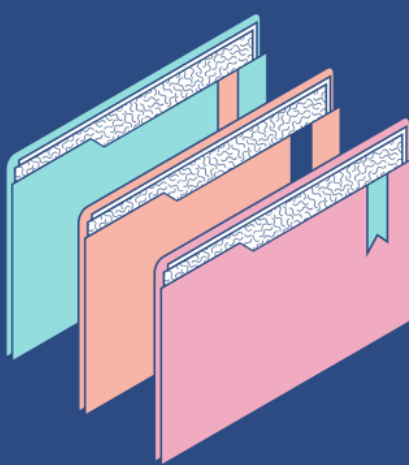
Appendix G: Community Learning Exchange 2 Presentation



COMMUNITY LEARNING EXCHANGE #2

Parent Community

REIMAGINING PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN A
SCHOOL COMMUNITY BY CO-CREATING A
PARTNERSHIP MODEL FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL



Agenda

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?

- INFORMED CONSENT
- RULES + OBJECTIVES
- PERSONAL NARRATIVE
- LEARNING EXCHANGE
- CONCLUSION

Tip: Use links to go to a different page inside your presentation.

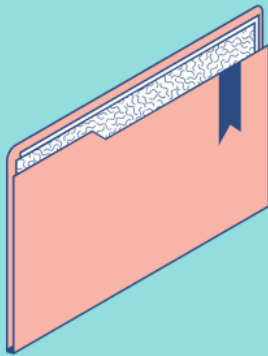
How: Highlight text, click on the link symbol on the toolbar, and select the page in your presentation you want to connect.



Rules + Objectives

- Welcome to G-Vegas! Vegas rules apply, what is said in here - stays in here
- Be open to challenging your thinking and that of those you will exchange ideas with, respectfully
- Contribute to data collection necessary to reimagine parent involvement by co-creating a partnership model in middle school

3



Informed Consent

Please refer to the forms in front of you...in order to participate, you must sign the consent.

Participation is completely voluntary; you may choose at any time to discontinue without risk of consequence.

4

Personal Narrative

WHAT DO YOU BRING INTO THE ROOM OR THE CONVERSATION?



What was your experience like as a middle school student?

Did you like middle school? What were you involved in during those years? Do you have a favorite memory or one you'd rather forget?

What do you remember about your parents' involvement when you were in middle school?

Were your parents actively involved in your school experience? If not, do you wish they were? How did their involvement impact your success?

Community Learning Exchange



6



Appendix H: Community Learning Exchange 3 Advertisement



The advertisement features a white background with a light gray grid pattern. At the top left, there is a rainbow with a gray star above it. The title "COMMUNITY LEARNING EXCHANGE" is prominently displayed in the upper center, with "COMMUNITY" and "EXCHANGE" in blue and "LEARNING" in green. To the right of the title is a blue horse head logo. Further right are two pushpins, one green and one blue, and a pencil. Below the title, the text "If you participated in one of the CLEs, the Parent Boot Camp or the Curriculum, Community and Conference Carnival - WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!" is written in a dark blue, sans-serif font. Below this text is a dark blue button with the white text "ENROLL NOW". To the right of the button, the date and time "October 17, 2025" and "12:00-2:00 PM" are listed. In the bottom left corner, there are icons of a calculator, a protractor, and a pencil. In the bottom center, there is a yellow alarm clock. In the bottom right corner, there is a circular photo of three smiling young people. A large, dark blue, curved line sweeps across the bottom right, framing the photo and the alarm clock.

COMMUNITY LEARNING EXCHANGE

If you participated in one of the CLEs,
the Parent Boot Camp or the
Curriculum, Community and
Conference Carnival - WE WANT TO
HEAR FROM YOU!

ENROLL NOW

October 17, 2025
12:00-2:00 PM

This is a research study to collect
important information about parent
engagement in middle school

Appendix I: Community Learning Exchange 3 Agenda

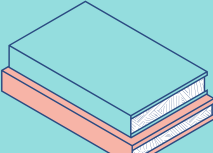


Community Learning Exchange 3
Mixed Group: Teachers and Parents

August 4, 2025
1:00-2:00 PM

Agenda

- INFORMED CONSENT
- RULES + OBJECTIVES
- PERSONAL NARRATIVE
- BARRIERS
- LEARNING EXCHANGE & SUGGESTIONS
- CONCLUSION



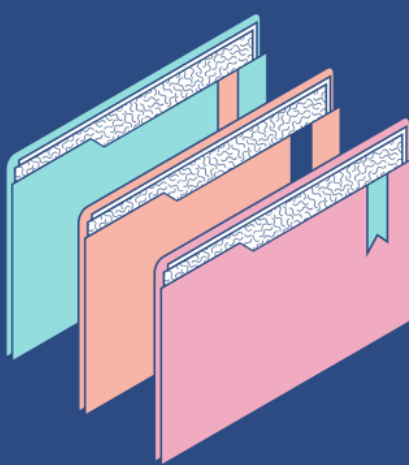
Appendix J: Community Learning Exchange 3 Presentation



COMMUNITY LEARNING EXCHANGE #3

MIXED Community

REIMAGINING PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN A
SCHOOL COMMUNITY BY CO-CREATING A
PARTNERSHIP MODEL FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL



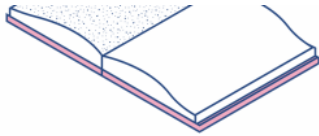
Agenda

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?

- Grounding Activity
- Learning Exchange
- Conclusion

Tip: Use links to go to a different page inside your presentation.

How: Highlight text, click on the link symbol on the toolbar, and select the page in your presentation you want to connect.



Rules + Objectives

- Welcome to G-Vegas! Vegas rules apply, what is said in here - stays in here
- Be open to challenging your thinking and that of those you will exchange ideas with, respectfully
- Contribute to data collection necessary to reimagine parent involvement by co-creating a partnership model in middle school

3

Personal Narrative

WHAT DO YOU BRING INTO THE ROOM OR THE CONVERSATION?

What BARRIERS prevent YOU from engaging?

What BARRIERS do you think prevent school/or (the opposite) from engaging?

DIRECTIONS:

1. Think about question and answer on a sticky note.
2. Choose a recorder to record responses
3. When everyone is ready, introduce yourself and your role and/or connection to HMS
4. Answer first question and rotate around group.
5. Answer second questions



Community Learning Exchange



5

ROTATE

As a group, read the question, key takeaways and the suggestions for school leaders.

What 1-2 suggestions stand out, and why? Be prepared to share **WHY**.

6



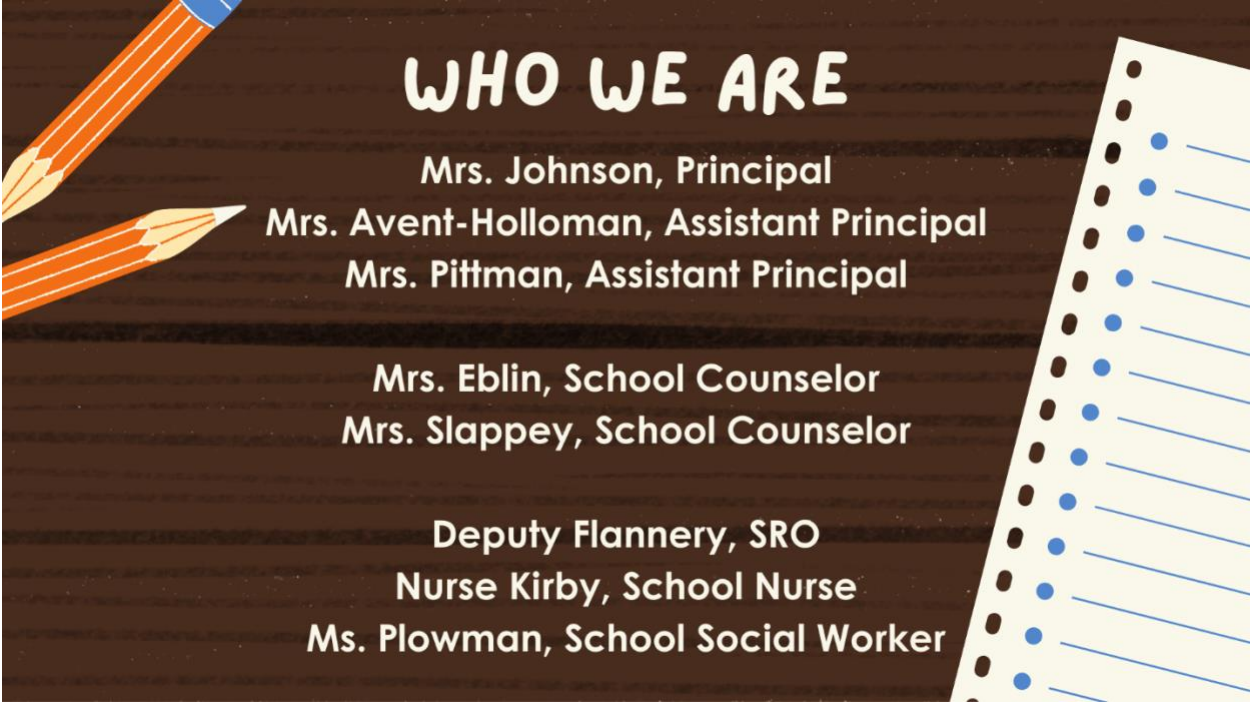
7

Appendix K: Engagement Barriers T-Chart

Staff Barriers	Parent Barriers
• Time • Schedule conflicts • Contact information that is updated • Location	• <u>So</u> many apps keeping track • Child communication Sometimes <u>THEY</u> are the barrier • Embarrassed they can't help • Poor relationship/ experiences in school • low trust toward school • Tech accessibility needs

Appendix L: Parent Boot Camp Presentation





WHO WE ARE

Mrs. Johnson, Principal
Mrs. Avent-Holloman, Assistant Principal
Mrs. Pittman, Assistant Principal

Mrs. Eblin, School Counselor
Mrs. Slappey, School Counselor

Deputy Flannery, SRO
Nurse Kirby, School Nurse
Ms. Plowman, School Social Worker

WELCOME TO HOPE MIDDLE!

We're HUGE!

We have 960 students. And because of that we have highly refined systems and structures that are efficient and create an orderly and safe environment. Please help us by following staff directions

We believe in Inclusion

We believe strongly in inclusion and belonging of everyone! From students with different abilities to those with different backgrounds, perspectives and interests.



Relationships are KEY

We deeply value our relationships with students and their families. We rely on open communication, trust and compassion to help us make last-relationships.

WHAT MAKES HOPE, HOPE!



Academic Accolades

- Our students outperform other middle schools in math, reading and science each year. Exceeding growth as measured by EVAAS and dominating regional academic competitions

Athletic Awards

- Our athletes dominate the competitions year after year 9 out of 11 conference championships last year!

Veteran Staff

- Our turnover rate is under 10% each year. Our teachers love their community and most will only leave Hope when they retire.
- This helps us maintain our culture of high expectations!

Parents Ourselves

- Most of us are, have been or will be a Hope parent. We make decisions that we would want for our children that positively impact ALL students.



A DAY AT HOPE



- Early Bird begins at 7:45 until 8:10AM in the cafe; \$2/day.
- Carriders will be dismissed at 8:12 - Do not dismiss before HMS staff signals.
- Bus riders will be dismissed at 8:10 for breakfast and 8:15 to enter to homeroom





A DAY AT HOPE

- 
- Breakfast is available, free of charge to every student
 - Athletes will take their gear to the locker room, then head to their homeroom
 - Homeroom will be a mix of housekeeping, announcements and iReady time. Students receiving tiered interventions will receive those at this time



A DAY AT HOPE

- 
- HR and their 1st block are the same class, no transition
 - 1st block is split in the middle by a 45 minute encore class
 - Teachers escort their students to the encore class areas; no one will get lost!

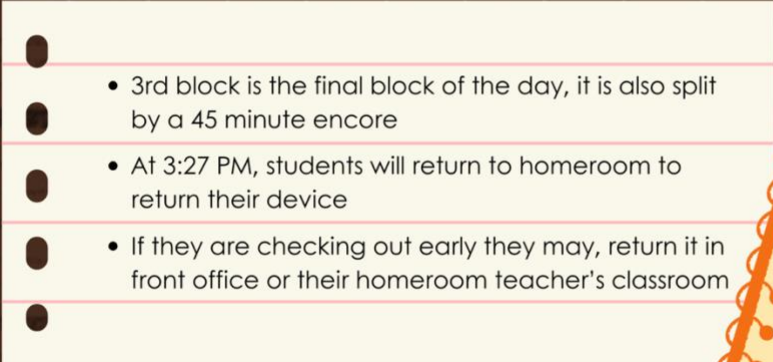


A DAY AT HOPE

- 
- Students return to their 1st core block for the second half - another 45 minutes
 - Second block will include their lunch period
 - Classes are assigned a table, not assigned seats. Lunch is free for all students



A DAY AT HOPE

- 
- 3rd block is the final block of the day, it is also split by a 45 minute encore
 - At 3:27 PM, students will return to homeroom to return their device
 - If they are checking out early they may, return it in front office or their homeroom teacher's classroom





A DAY AT HOPE

- 
- Car riders and bus riders will dismiss at 3:30 PM
 - 6th grade is picked up in the lane that runs in front of the school. Older kids should wait in the youngest student's lane.
 - Bus riders will dismiss at 3:35 PM
 - Be ALERT in the car line



HOW TO HELP YOUR STUDENT FIND SUCCESS



**9 WAYS TO HELP YOUR
STUDENT FIND SUCCESS
WHILE IN MIDDLE SCHOOL
AND BEYOND**





HELP THEM GET ORGANIZED

- CREATE AM AND PM ROUTINES
- BUY APPROPRIATE SUPPLIES TO GET/STAY ORGANIZED
- REGULARLY CHECK THEIR AGENDAS
- CLEAN OUT BOOKBAGS AT SCHOOL BREAKS
- TALK ABOUT WHEN AND HOW TO PREPARE FOR TESTS
QUIZZES AND PROJECT DUE DATES



USE YOUR RESOURCES

- HOPE HAPPENINGS (CALL, EMAIL, WEBSITE, FACEBOOK)
- INFINITE CAMPUS (ATTENDANCE, GRADES)
- CANVAS
- REMIND, CLASS DOJO, EMAILS
- PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES
- TUTOR.COM - ONLINE INTERACTIVE TUTORING



HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE

- EXPECT STUDENTS TO TURN IN ASSIGNMENTS, COMPLETE HW AND PROJECTS
- NATURAL CONSEQUENCES COME FROM MISSING ASSIGNMENTS (GAPS IN LEARNING, POOR GRADES)
- EXPECT THEIR BEST (BEHAVIOR, GRADES, CONDUCT) AT SCHOOL, COMMUNITY & HOME
- CONSEQUENCES AT HOME FOR NOT MEETING YOUR EXPECTATIONS (BEHAVIOR, GRADES, CONDUCT)

GET INVOLVED

- JOIN THE PTA (VOLUNTEER, DONATE)
- VOLUNTEER TO BE A GUEST SPEAKER
- SERVE ON A COMMITTEE
- ATTEND CURRICULUM NIGHTS/EVENTS

Parent Boot Camp Presentation, Slide 1

BE ENGAGED

- CONNECT THROUGH PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES
- ASK WHAT YOUR STUDENT IS LEARNING ABOUT, ASK THEM WHO THEY TALKED TO AT LUNCH
- KNOW WHO YOUR STUDENT'S TEACHERS ARE
- RESPOND TO EMAILS/CALLS FROM TEACHERS & FRONT OFFICE STAFF

BE AVAILABLE

- SAY "YES" TO PICKING UP AFTER SCHOOL OR DROPPING OFF EARLY FOR EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES; CARPOOL WITH FRIENDS
- HELP WITH HOMEWORK, PROJECTS
- PROBLEM-SOLVE SOCIAL AND SCHOOL CONFLICTS

BE A LISTENER

- ASSUME THE BEST FROM THE TEACHER
- LISTEN TO YOUR STUDENT, VALIDATE THEIR FEELINGS
- HELP THEM DECIDE HOW TO MANAGE THE CONFLICT, SOMETIMES THEY WANT TO VENT
- SELF-ADVOCACY IS A SKILL BEST LEARNED THROUGH PRACTICE
- NOT EVERY PROBLEM NEEDS THE PRINCIPALS ATTENTION

PRIORITIZE ATTENDANCE

- MAKE ATTENDING SCHOOL ALL-DAY, EVERYDAY A PRIORITY
- NOTES SHOULD BE TURNED IN WHEN STUDENTS RETURN
- EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES (UP TO 3 DAYS EXCUSED)
- COMMUNICATE WITH TEACHERS REGARDING ABSENCE

MONITOR CELLPHONES

- ALMOST ALL IN-SCHOOL CONFLICT BEGINS WITH A CELLPHONE.
- MONITOR THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND OTHER APPS
- PRACTICE HABITS SUCH AS CHARGING IN A CENTRAL LOCATIONS, SHARED PASSWORDS, MONITORING APPS
- DISCUSS YOUR FAMILY'S EXPECTATIONS
- WAIT UNTIL EIGHTH, IF YOU CAN

BELL TO BELL BAN

1. Returned at the end of call
2. Returned at the end of the day
3. Parent must pick up after school

QUESTIONS FROM YOU

COMMUNICATION FROM TEACHERS

- WEEKLY COMMUNICATION FROM TEAM; KEEP PARENTS UPDATED ON IMPORTANT DATES
- WEEKLY CALL/EMAIL FROM PRINCIPAL

GETTING LOST

- TRAVEL IN PACKS; TEACHERS SWEEP STUDENTS
- TEACHERS ARE IN THE HALL TO HELP
- 4 MINUTE TRANSITIONS

IEP/504 PLANS

- THOSE PLANS WILL BE FOLLOWED AS WRITTEN.
- AS ALWAYS, AS A PARENT, YOU CAN CALL A MEETING AT ANYTIME
- INFORMAL MEETING WITH TEACHERS IS OK, TOO!

LOCKERS

- WE DON'T USE LOCKERS, MORE STUDENTS THAN LOCKERS
- CLEAN OUT BOOK BAGS WEEKLY!

QUESTIONS FROM YOU



NERVES ABOUT NEW SCHOOL

- IT'S 100% NORMAL! TALK ABOUT THEIR FEELINGS WITH THEM.
- ASSURE THEM THEY WILL BE SAFE AND CARED FOR

BULLYING

- WE DO NOT TOLERATE BULLYING! BUT WE CAN ONLY ADDRESS WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT
- ENCOURAGE STUDENT TO TALK TO AN ADULT
- BULLYING VS. PICKING

OLDER STUDENTS

- VERY FEW INTERACTIONS BETWEEN GRADES LEVELS (EARLY BIRD, BUS/CAR)
- ADULT SUPERVISION

APPROPRIATE CLASSES

- ACCELERATED VS. STANDARD DETERMINED BY DATA AND TEACHER RECOMMENDATION

QUESTIONS FROM YOU



SAFETY & SECURITY

- WE HAVE A FULL-TIME SRO, DEPUTY FLANNERY.
- SECURITY CHECKS DAILY; RANDOM WEAPONS DETECTION SEARCHES (2X/MONTH)

HW/WORKLOAD

- EXPECT 10 MINUTES X GRADE LEVEL (60 MINS MAX)
- HOMEWORK WILL BE TECH-FREE
- MATH/ELA MOST NIGHTS (RARELY ON WEEKEND)

CHROMEBOOKS

- WE ARE 1:1 WITH DEVICES
- DEVICES WILL BE RETURNED EACH DAY
- PAY THE \$25 SCHOOL FEES/TECH FEE (ACTS AS INSURANCE)

INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIORS

- FIGHTING IS NOT A COMMON OCCURANCE
- BEHAVIORS ARE ADDRESSED SWIFTLY BY TEACHERS/STAFF
- ALERTS OF NEIGHBORHOOD CONCERNS HELP US

QUESTIONS FROM YOU



FRIENDS & PEERS

- FRIEND GROUPS TEND TO CHANGE IN MIDDLE SCHOOL - IT'S OK!
- HELP YOUR STUDENT CONNECT WITH FRIENDS OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

CONTACT INFORMATION

- SCHOOL NEEDS MOST CURRENT CONTACT INFORMATION, CUSTODY INFORMATION & EMERGENCY PICK UP

TRANSPORTATION CHANGES

- IN WRITING ONLY FOR PICK UP OR 1-TIME CHANGE (EMAIL)
- NO NOTICE FOR CAR RIDER NEEDED
- NO CHANGING BUSES

SPECIFIC NEEDS

- EMAIL THE TEACHER TO SHARE INFORMATION
- REQUEST A CONFERENCE OR PHONE CALL
- INQUIRE ABOUT EXTRA PRACTICE, HW HELP, ETC.



WE'RE HERE!

Email us or call and make an appointment to meet.

We care about your student, their happiness, sense of belonging and their academic and social success

We can't wait to partner with you for the next 3 years!

Appendix M: Curriculum, Community and Conference Carnival Advertisement



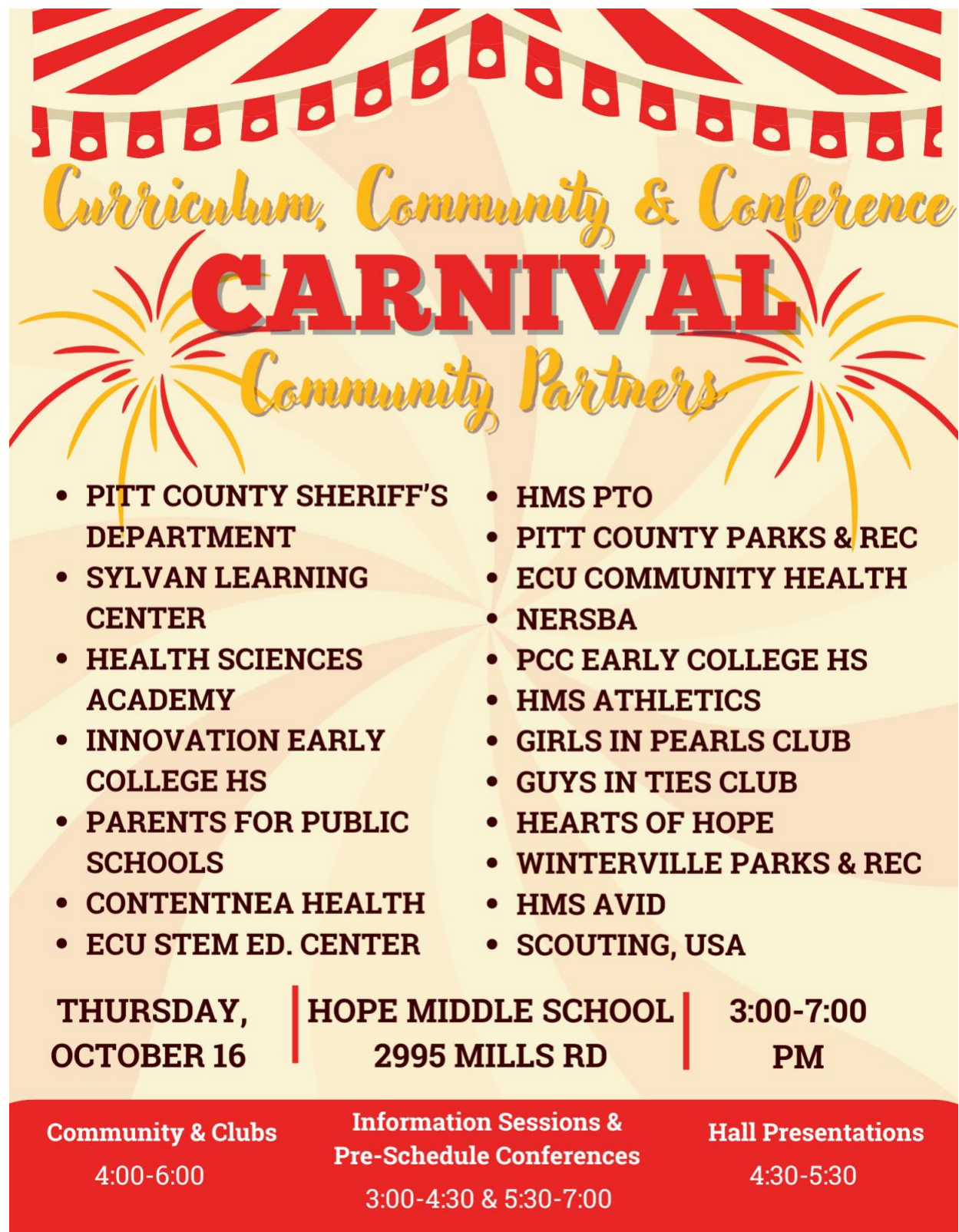
Curriculum, Community & Conference
CARNIVAL

Join us for **SHOW-STOPPING** event!

Parent workshops about Infinite Campus/Canvas	Attend pre-schedule Parent-Teacher conferences	Grade levels will present "a day in the life" of students
---	--	---

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16	HOPE MIDDLE SCHOOL 2995 MILLS RD	3:00-7:00 PM
---------------------------------	---	-------------------------

Community & Clubs 4:00-6:00	Information Sessions & Pre-Schedule Conferences 3:00-4:30 & 5:30-7:00	Hall Presentations 4:30-5:30
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Curriculum, Community & Conference

CARNIVAL

Community Partners

- PITT COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT
- SYLVAN LEARNING CENTER
- HEALTH SCIENCES ACADEMY
- INNOVATION EARLY COLLEGE HS
- PARENTS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS
- CONTENTNEA HEALTH
- ECU STEM ED. CENTER
- HMS PTO
- PITT COUNTY PARKS & REC
- ECU COMMUNITY HEALTH
- NERSBA
- PCC EARLY COLLEGE HS
- HMS ATHLETICS
- GIRLS IN PEARLS CLUB
- GUYS IN TIES CLUB
- HEARTS OF HOPE
- WINTERVILLE PARKS & REC
- HMS AVID
- SCOUTING, USA

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16 | **HOPE MIDDLE SCHOOL** | **3:00-7:00 PM**
2995 MILLS RD

Community & Clubs	Information Sessions & Pre-Schedule Conferences	Hall Presentations
4:00-6:00	3:00-4:30 & 5:30-7:00	4:30-5:30